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HCI-J1-NOTES

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CURRENT AFFAIRS	VALUE OF HUMANITIESIN THE 21ST CENTURY

Possible Essay Questions

1. 'In our pursuit of academic success, we have forgotten the true aims of education.' How true is this of your society? (JPJC 2024 Prelims)
2. Examine the view that the scientist is concerned only with knowledge, not morality. (A Levels 2020)
3. “Unlike the Sciences, the Arts do nothing to solve the problems of society.” Discuss. (DHS 2019 Prelims)
4. Discuss the view that science and technology is the key to your society’s success. (YIJC 2019 Prelims)
5. Consider the claim that the study of the humanities has little relevance in a technologically advanced world. (TJC 2018 Prelims)

Introduction and Context

- Humanities cover a wide range of academic disciplines that focus on culture and human society—understanding humanity through the exploration of art and ethics.
- The term itself comes from studia humanitatis, the study of humanity, moving from a focus on Latin and Greek texts during the Renaissance to a broader selection in the centuries since. This includes the study of foreign languages, history, philosophy, as
- well as language, performing, and visual arts. The humanities form a core part of a Liberal Arts Education, manifesting either in Liberal Arts Colleges like Swarthmore
- College or even the United States Naval Academy. Schools well known for their scientific research, such as MIT, also tend to offer similar course plans in their renowned schools of Humanities, Arts, and Social Sciences.
  However, the 21st Century, characterized by rapid technological advancement and
- prolific scientific discovery, has called the value of humanities into question.
  There has been a global shift—especially in pragmatic societies like Singapore—towards
- the study of Science, Technology, Engineering and Math (STEM) subjects, which seem to provide more promising careers for students.
  Today we will be discussing if there is still any use for these subjects in the modern world.
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The Cases for and Against the Humanities

1. The humanities used to hold a hallowed place in human history and the origins of university education.

- Instark contrast tosentiments held today, the humanities wereoriginally seen in the ancient world as practical while the sciences were viewed as abstract. The liberal arts prepared youth through the study of grammar, rhetoric, and logic, as well as astronomy, music, and arts—all important for an educated citizen to participate and excel in political and public life. The sciences—then called natural philosophy—focused on inquiring into the workings of the world, sometimes for practical goals like medicine, but often for more abstract purposes like ascertaining the true "forms" of nature.
- The humanities were also defined by their distinction from the study of religion and religious text, otherwise known as the study of divinity.
- Higher learning in Western society continued from its origins in the thought of ancient Greece and Rome, and the original medieval universities (such as Oxford, founded in 1096) taught the same core subjects of humanities and inquiry.
- The School of Athens, established in 387 BC, and here depicted in a 16th-century fresco by Raphael, continued to be the benchmark and idea of an educational institution.

- In the Enlightenment of the 17th and 18th centuries, education in the humanities came to be seen as a "gentleman"—instilling the values of honour and independence. In contrast, education in professions like law and medicine were taught outside of universities.
- Over the last two millennia, the study of the humanities was often considered the most
  - Ø important and practical form of education, one that was linked also with ideas of civilisation and personal qualities.

2. In a world increasingly dominated by STEM, humanities seem to have little impact on the fabric of society, and some have questioned their value, place, and worth.

- Theshift away fromthe Humanitiesstartedwiththe Industrial Revolutionof the late 18th century. As the labour market demanded more high-level skills, engineering and science became a growing part of the university curriculum. As we look to a future that is high-tech and rife with scientific advancements, STEM subjects seem to become increasingly relevant. The humanities have thus been dismissed as 'self-indulgent' and frivolous.

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- This has led in the 21st century to funding cuts and a reduction in department size for the humanities in multiple universities, as governments do not see the purpose of using taxpayer money to fund the study of subjects that are not 'job-friendly' and will not directly benefit the economy. In 2015, more than 50 Japanese universities were set to
- close or downsize their humanities and social science departments after Education Minister Hakuban Shimomura encouraged higher education institutions to offer "… education that better anticipates the needs of society". This movement has also been seen in the West, typically seen as less pragmatic than Eastern societies when it comes to
- education decisions. Before losing his re-election bid as Prime Minister of the UK, Rishi Sunak outlined plans to make Maths a compulsory A-
  Level subject.
  A 2024 report also found that British students have been moving away from the
- Humanities, with a drop in students taking humanities subjects—50% in 2015, an only 24% of students in 2022.
  A lack of government funding also sends a message to the public that the humanities are
- not worth investing their time and effort in.
  More is being done by governments to encourage employment in STEM industries to
- attempt to 'align education with the job market'. Decisions to major in STEM subjects are largely rewarded with higher pay.
  A salary survey done by the National Association for Colleges and Employers found that
- new engineers were expected to earn an average of $65,000 a year, while the average for humanities majors was slightly above $46,000.
  In 2023, many state-funded public institutions in the US have proposed cuts to programs,
- mostly in the humanities, as politicians have refocused funding towards engineering and business programs.
  This showed the determination of governments to put their funds and taxpayer money
Ø into areas that were explicitly beneficial to the economy, which from the statistics above, seem to be the STEM industries.
  Additionally, there are more job prospects for STEM students. According to the U.S.
- Bureau of Labour Statistics, STEM industries recorded a 10.5% increase in employment, compared with a 5.2% increase in non-STEM industries between May 2009 and May 2015.
  This change in class makeup has also been felt in private institutions. Harvard reported
- that from 2008 to 2019, the number of English majors fell from 236 to 54, while the number of Computer Science concentrators rose from 86 to 180.
  Students are responding to the external pressure to do more 'relevant subjects' by taking
Ø up fewer humanities majors. A study done in 2015 by the American Academy of Arts and Sciences found that the number of bachelor's degrees earned in the humanities in 2015 had decreased by 10% from the year before.

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3. However, there is a growing awareness that the humanities still have a place in a STEM-dominated world, as they provide insights that STEM subjects cannot, allowing us to address various issues comprehensively.

- While the humanities may not bring explicit benefits to the economy,they haveimplicit value in the skills they teach graduates that prove crucial in the workplace. Studying the
- human condition allows humanities students to develop empathy and appreciation for others, which promotes teamwork in the office. According to a survey of business leaders
- done in 2021 by the Association of American Colleges and Universities, most employers noted that a liberal arts education was highly valuable. Many were more concerned about graduates' critical thinking, problem-solving and analytic skills, teamwork, and communication through writing and speaking than specific knowledge of the field they were working in. Such awareness has prompted the Massachusetts Institute of Technology

Ø (MIT), one of
the top STEM universities, to include the humanities in all undergraduates' curriculums. Studying subjects such as literature and music occupies at least a quarter of all class time, and this has helped students develop skills such as reasoning and a greater appreciation for other cultures. Successful people in STEM industries such as Mark Zuckerberg and

- Susan Wojcicki had their education grounded in the humanities. Zuckerberg studied Latin in high school and studied psychology and computer science at Harvard. Wojcicki—whose garage Google was started in and who served as CEO of YouTube from 2014 to 2023—studied History and Literature at the same school. Mark Zuckerberg once said, "Facebook is as much about psychology and sociology as it is about technology", highlighting how

Ø STEM and the humanities have equal importance even in STEM industries. Additionally, humanities and the study of the human condition allow humanities graduates to have a better understanding of various cultures globally, a crucial skill in today's interconnected

- and increasingly globalized world. There have been multiple cases of technology-sound engineering projects failing because they did not take into consideration the local cultural context. Hence, by providing alternative perspectives, the humanities allow for more fully
- informed solutions to be
developed in partnership with STEM industries.
While STEM tells us what to build, the humanities tell us why, how and where we should be building them with the betterment of society in mind.

Ø The problems of the future are likely to be multi-faceted and hence there is a need to develop a wide range of skills that derive from both humanities and STEM subjects.

Ø In the face of the growing automation of jobs even at the professional level, the only way to ensure that young people's skills remain relevant is to focus on the teaching of skills such

Ø as divergent and lateral thinking, problem-solving, compassion and empathy. The humanities are better able to do that because of the focus on the human condition across various subject areas.

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- In a liberal arts education, students study disciplines that include both the sciences and the humanities, this breaks down the perceived binary between the humanities and the sciences and is the model for many top universities, especially in the U.S.

The Humanities and Singapore

1. Industry and political leaders are beginning to realise the benefits the humanities can bringto Singapore's socialandeconomiccircumstances.

- Living in a pragmatic and competitive society, Singaporean students have unsurprisingly pursued STEM subjects, which bring about immediate and tangible results for their careers and society. The general sentiment amongst Singaporeans—especially older
- generations who
  contributed to the rapid economic growth and nation-building of the 20th century— is that
  STEM should be prioritized over the humanities. This mindset has however changed in
- successive years.
  Many founders of innovative Singaporean companies did not graduate with STEM degrees. For example, Tan Min Liang, founder and CEO of tech company Razer and Singapore's youngest self-made millionaire,

- was a graduate of law.
  This shows that STEM jobs and humanities majors do not have to be mutually exclusive,
- even in a pragmatic society like Singapore.
  The humanities are especially important since Singapore is highly connected globally. This requires a good knowledge of foreign
- cultures and history for Singaporeans to do business with the rest of the world effectively.
  Ironically, as Singapore tries to become a 'smart nation' through the increased use of
- technology, the jobs that will withstand such disruption are humanities jobs.
  Smarter machines will be able to take over much of our daily tasks; however, they are unable to fully replicate the human experience of empathy and understand the nuances of human nature completely. This makes the skills that the humanities teach ever
- necessary.
  Yale-NUS, established in 2013, was Singapore's first liberal arts college. Its president Tan Tai Yong described the value of an education there as "[it] teaches you to question,
- encourages you to debate, think more broadly, and then come to your own conclusions."
  This marked a shift in Singapore's education system away from an "over-emphasis" on easily definable but restrictive academic results—also seen in the change in grading on the Primary School Leaving Examinations (PSLE) around that time. This partnership was also seen by observers, such as those in the New York Times, as part of a trend towards the globalization of higher education.

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- However, progress towards valuing the humanities has not always been consistent—in 2021 the National University of Singapore decided to end its partnership with Yale, meaning that the Class of 2025 will be the last cohort to graduate with a Yale-NUS degree. Yale-NUS has been replaced with the creatively named NUS College (NUSC).
- While the new College will not focus on a liberal arts education, the curriculum there does require mapped elective courses and both general and global courses. NUS also reformatted and increased its General Education framework in 2021 for all undergraduate students. Despite its later closure, that Yale-NUS was even created and
Ø partnered with Singapore's leading public university shows the changing attitudes of the government towards the value of the humanities.

2. Students are also beginning to realise the opportunities that an education which includes thehumanitiescanprovidethemwith.

- In recent years, there has been a greater understanding among students about the merits of an education which includes the humanities in its curriculum. In particular, a liberal arts
- education has been lauded for its programmes which encourage students to think and communicate in different modes as the education they receive is broad and diverse. Furthermore, qualms about poor job prospects for humanities graduates have been
- discredited by recent statistics that have proven otherwise. A study published in 2020 on the number of graduates obtaining a first degree in
- humanities and the social sciences in Singapore between the years 2009 and 2018 found that there has been an especially steady increase in salary from $2,193 in 2015 to $3,464 in 2018.

Liberal arts graduates are also highly sought after. Employment statistics for Yale-NUS
- College, like those for liberal arts colleges worldwide, suggest that their graduates compete well in the job market, even in technological fields.

According to the Singapore Graduate Employment Survey release in 2018, the Yale-NUS
- class of 2017 graduates achieved an employment rate of over 93 per cent within the first six months of graduation, as compared to an overall employment rate of 88.9 per cent across three autonomous universities in Singapore, as measured by a graduate employment survey which polled over 11,000 fresh graduates from NUS, NTU and SMU.

Hence, it is evident that students are becoming increasingly aware of the benefits of an
Ø education that either focuses on the humanities, or at the very least, incorporates them into its curriculum.

Such an education emphasises breadth and fosters the ability to perceive problems from
Ø a variety of angles – a quintessential aspect of a humanities or liberal arts education. This attracts students to enrol in university programmes which allow them to acquire the range of ideas and abilities needed to move from narrowly defined jobs to leadership positions.

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- Furthermore, the generally greater appreciation for such merits of a humanities or liberal arts education also addresses any lingering concern regarding poor job prospects as adaptability is especially critical in today's rapidly changing environment. In 2020, the
- Interdisciplinary College of Humanities and Sciences (CHS) was created, merging the old Faculty of Arts and Social Sciences with the Faculty of Science. CHS is thus now the biggest faculty in NUS. Despite the combination, enrolment students have still shown a preference
- for the
  sciences—2020 saw the peak of students specialising in arts and social sciences (6,400), before falling to around 4,400 in 2024.
- At the same time, enrolments in the Faculty of Science have been increasing, from 4,100 in 2020 to 5,200 in 2024. Nevertheless, students in Singapore, through general education
- requirements and the merging of colleges, now have more opportunities than previous generations to explore the humanities, even if they major in other subjects.

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