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Antony Hoyte-West

Independent scholar, United Kingdom

antony.hoyte.west@gmail.com

ORCID ID: 0000-0003-4410-6520

Humanities, Higher Education, and the Digital Age:
An Overview of the Provision of Online Taught Postgraduate Programmes at the Four Ancient Scottish Universities

Abstract: As demonstrated by their fundamental role in our modern societies, the humanities represent an important area of research and study at university level. However, in the light of increased social, economic, and political interest in STEM-related subjects, the humanities appear to have become less prominent in recent years. Noting the rise of online education, this study presents and analyses the online taught postgraduate provision currently available at the four ancient universities in Scotland (St Andrews, Glasgow, Aberdeen, and Edinburgh). After a short historical summary of the position of the humanities in university education, as well as the particularities of Scotland and the four selected universities, this study employs a qualitative and desk-based approach to analyse the relevant online programmes. It aims to look at the types of subject areas covered, the level of qualifications available, as well as giving a comparative overview of the different offerings, thus illustrating and discussing the range of online humanities-based provision at the present time.

Keywords: humanities in the 21st century, medieval universities, online degrees, postgraduate education, Scotland

Introduction

Commonly considered one of the cornerstones of modern-day tertiary institutions, the university teaching of the humanities has a storied history dating back to medieval times (Gertz, 2017). As part of the curricula of early European universities, what would nowadays be described as the humanities permeated the trivium, the foundational grounding in grammar, logic, and rhetoric which provided the basis for the more advanced quadrivium, whose four subjects comprised astronomy, arithmetic, geometry, and music (Pendley, 2009). These were the subsequent underpinnings for the traditional faculties of philosophy, law, theology, and medicine of many older universities, which—as Szell (2024, p. 2) reiterates—offered training for future members of the clergy as well as for legal and medical practitioners.

From this distant base in the Middle Ages, subsequent intellectual, sociocultural, and technological developments over the centuries (such as the invention of the printing press, the Renaissance, the Enlightenment, and the Industrial Revolution) impacted all areas of human activity, and thus also the teaching and study of the humanities, broadening the field and expanding it in ways far beyond what could have previously been imagined.

Yet, for all the omnipresent discussions about the humanities in modern-day academia and society, the question of which disciplines and fields of study are included in it remains somewhat imprecise. The Cambridge Dictionary defines the humanities as "the study of subjects such as literature, language, history, and philosophy", with its American variant noting it as "literature, language, history, philosophy, and other subjects that are not a science, or the study of these subjects" (Cambridge Dictionary, 2025). More expansively, the online entry in the Encyclopaedia Britannica terms the humanities as "those branches of knowledge that concern themselves with human beings and their culture", again distinguishing them from the sciences (including "somewhat less decisively, from the social sciences"), and listing the subject areas covered as the arts, languages and their literatures, philosophy, and history (Encyclopaedia Britannica, 2025).

In an online blogpost for the British Academy entitled 'What are the humanities?', eminent historian Diarmaid MacCulloch notes their breadth and depth and the various forms of analysis and enquiry utilised, observing that the institution "gathers scholarly expertise in subjects like law, philosophy, the history of art and music, religions, language and its meanings, literature and all forms of human history, right back to the unwritten history that can only be approached through archaeology" (MacCulloch, 2018).

These definitions can perhaps be contrasted with the day-to-day reality of the modern world, where science and technology seem to dominate current global discourse. Indeed, with politics, commerce, and society-at-large seemingly favouring the attributes and skills linked to curricula based on the STEM subjects of Science, Technology, Engineering, and Mathematics (Breiner et al., 2012, pp. 4–5), the role of the humanities in the present era remains open to discussion. To this end, the British Academy (2025a) has also recently developed the overarching concept of SHAPE (an acronym for Social sciences, Humanities and the Arts for People

and the Economy), thus highlighting the role of the humanities, *inter alia*, within its broader policymaking activities (British Academy, 2025b). Therefore, as this thematic issue presents, the place of the humanities in modern twenty-first century universities remain an important issue, as well as in society at large (Linstead & Lehman, 2023, pp. 8–9). As mentioned elsewhere with regard to the study, teaching, and professional practice of languages and translation (Hoyte-West, 2024a), ceaseless advances in technological development, the use of generative AI for a multitude of purposes, and market forces in an uncertain sociopolitical climate have meant that humanities-based education has had to evolve in this digital world.

In observing some of these responses to these ever-changing circumstances, this article aims to present and analyse the online taught postgraduate provision in humanities currently available at the four oldest universities in Scotland: St Andrews, Glasgow, Aberdeen, and Edinburgh. In illustrating the range of programmes available as depicted in the institutions' prospectuses, the study forms part of a larger project looking at various facets of this phenomenon. To date, these have examined aspects such as the depiction of digital skills in the online prospectuses for postgraduate programmes in Teaching English to Speakers of Other Languages (TESOL) at Scottish universities (Hoyte-West, 2024b), as well as the representation of digital aspects into postgraduate interpreter training courses at British institutions (Hoyte-West, 2024c). An earlier study also examines the presence of literary translation modules in postgraduate British degree programmes in translation and interpreting (Hoyte-West, 2023a). Therefore, the present study offers some short general remarks on humanities and university education by providing a cursory historical overview, before focusing on Scotland, its unique education system, and the place of the four universities therein. After outlining the background to the case studies and the methodology utilised, the relevant research findings will then be presented and discussed.

Brief observations on the humanities and university education in the United Kingdom

British education is often highly regarded on the international stage, and according to official reports, the United Kingdom is commonly ranked second

(after the United States of America) in terms of the most popular global study destinations for international students (Bolton, Lewis, & Gower, 2024, p. 4). This can perhaps be ascribed to the reputation and quality of many of the country's tertiary institutions, including the notable examples of Oxford and Cambridge. In frequently dominating international university rankings (e.g., see Times Higher Education, 2025), those two institutions are not only known for their ground-breaking research and teaching, but also for their iconic status in literature, culture, and society (Dougill, 2010; Hoyte-West, 2024d). The widespread popularity of British university education could also be linked to the current role and status of English, whose influence as the lingua franca of the international academic world—and thus a global language of prestige and advancement—cannot be underestimated (see British Council, 2013, p. 7).

In the specific context of England, Oxford and Cambridge were the sole universities in the country from their foundations in the twelfth and thirteenth centuries up until the early nineteenth century, thus qualifying as the two oldest universities in the English-speaking world (University of Oxford, 2025; University of Cambridge, 2025). In the Kingdom of Scotland, however, institutions were founded in four cities during the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries and thus, despite its smaller size, for several hundred years it had twice as many universities as England, with the first university in Ireland founded in the mid-sixteenth century (Bell, 2000, p. 166).

With the country expanding to eventually encompass the entirety of the British Isles, the advent of the Industrial Revolution and Britain's colonial aspirations meant that the United Kingdom became a major world power during the nineteenth century. During this era, politics, commerce, and manufacturing became increasingly important (Allen, 2011), with corresponding effects on the country's educational landscape. In 1826, University College London was founded as England's third university, notable for the fact that it did not have the religious requirements then imposed at Oxford and Cambridge (Harte, North, & Brewis, 2018, p. 13). As the powerhouse of empire, trade, and industry, the market called for more academic qualifications and training, which—allied with the development of the professions—often became necessary for social and economic advancement (Duman, 1979; Scott, 1993, p. 4). As such, new academic

institutions sprang up in the nineteenth and early twentieth-centuries (later to be known as 'red-brick'—see Whyte, 2015, pp. 6–9) and curricula began to change. With regard to the humanities, the former dominance of Latin and Greek—both as objects of study and as languages of teaching—was eroding in the light of 'new' degrees offered in then newfangled subjects such as English literature (Bacon, 1986).

Consequently, other forms of education began to be created by the universities in order to cater to different audiences. These included the development of correspondence studies including the University of London's extensive programme, which offered its first distance-learning qualifications in 1858 and still does so (University of London, 2025; also Tight, 2005). In addition, Britain's rapid industrialisation and urbanisation, combined with advances in compulsory schooling and increased literacy rates, led to the provision of extramural studies for working people and others (Brake, 2024). Also notable was the fact that, after the mid-nineteenth century, university education for women became increasingly permitted, though in many cases they were not allowed to complete degrees or had to undertake a special course of study—by way of example, St Andrews awarded women the degree of Lady Literate in Arts (LLA) (Smith, 2014). Other developments relevant to the humanities included the adoption of the modern-style PhD by British universities in the early twentieth century (Park, 2005, p. 192), which, as we all know, has become ubiquitous over the ensuing decades.

Alongside the profound societal changes of post-war Britain and the end of the British Empire, the university environment was also evolving. In the 1950s and 1960s, new institutions (the so-called 'plate-glass' universities, due to their campus architecture) were created (Beloff, 1970 [1968], pp. 11–12). In the 1990s, many polytechnics were given degree-awarding powers and became full universities (Emms, 2022), and the first decades of the new millennium have again seen changes such as the development of overseas campuses of British universities (Bennell, 2019) in addition to—as will be presented here—the development of programmes based on online teaching and learning modalities. These aspects have been accompanied by other relevant factors which have impacted the humanities—for example, the adoption of neoliberal policies at the political level and the perceived need for universities to represent

'added value'; the upsurge in domestic and international student numbers; and the introduction of fees (and student loans) for undergraduate and postgraduate programmes (for a discussion of these matters, see Brown & Hillman, 2023).

Writing in the 1980s, the well-known satirical novels of the late David Lodge poked fun at these then-nascent trends and their effects on the humanities. In his so-called 'Campus Trilogy' of works (Tripney, 2011)[1], Lodge provided a humorous take on the pressures and strains posed by changing academic and societal conditions through the lens of a fictional exchange between the English literature departments of a British and an American university, involving many culturally-related escapades and other comic shenanigans. Though Lodge did anticipate the rise of technology in his fiction (e.g., see Lodge, 1986 [1984], pp. 242–243), the development and uptake of the internet and associated technologies over the past decades has utterly transformed the domain of education. As exemplified by the forced shift to online teaching and learning during the COVID-19 pandemic, in many countries and education systems this modality has now become commonplace (Hoyte-West, 2023b). As the way we use and access information is changing, the importance attached to degrees and programmes of study is also evolving, as illustrated by the creation of non-assessed courses such as MOOCs (Papadakis, 2023) and the development of highly-focused microcredentials (Varadarajan, Koh, & Daniel, 2023).

Globalisation has also enhanced supranational efforts to standardise and enhance the mutual recognition of university qualifications, such as the implementation of the Bologna Process and the tripartite bachelor-master-doctorate degree system (Wächter, 2004). In general global terms, it has also been argued that such broader approaches are also influencing disciplinary discourses (i.e., the way that academic knowledge is taught and produced), with the resulting need for authors to write in English and to adapt their writing styles to Anglo-American models for publication in prestigious outlets (Lehman, 2025, pp. 26–29). In the context of the humanities and online education, the influence

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[1]   These were the acclaimed novels *Changing Places* (1975), *Small World* (1984), and *Nice Work* (1988). The latter two were both shortlisted for the prestigious Booker Prize (see The Booker Prizes, 2025).

of external market forces can be added to these factors, as well as the need to amend programmes and syllabi to reflect changing student demands and expectations (Twining et al., 2021; also Hoyte-West, 2024a, p. 9), especially given that many students nowadays can often be considered as digital natives (Bayraktar & Tomczyk, 2021).

As recent media reports have demonstrated (e.g., see Adams, 2025; Ferguson, 2025, etc.), the higher education sector in the United Kingdom currently appears to be undergoing a period of instability. This has meant that departments have been earmarked for closure or their offerings curtailed, and staff redundancies have been implemented (Hoyte-West, 2024e, p. 293). In addition, student numbers have noticeably declined in certain disciplines for varying reasons, for example in some humanities-based subjects such as modern languages (Bowler, 2020). Accordingly, given this uncertainty, it is therefore pertinent to investigate the situation regarding the tertiary provision of humanities-based education, as the present study aims to do through analysis of the relevant online postgraduate provision offered by four selected universities.

The Scottish education system and the four ancient universities

The presence of four ancient universities in Scotland is clear evidence of the country's long heritage of tertiary education. With a lengthy history as an independent kingdom until the 1707 Act of Union, one of the many ways which Scotland retains its distinctive identity is through its education system, which differs substantially from England, Wales, and Northern Ireland (Bell, 2000). As also outlined in Hoyte-West (2024b), Scottish university education is typically based on a four-year undergraduate honours degree, after which a one-year taught master's degree is followed which qualifies individuals for doctoral study. Though similar to some European countries (such as Spain, which also follows a 4 + 1 model—see Elias, 2010, p. 55), this is different to the rest of the United Kingdom, where three-year undergraduate degrees followed by a one-year taught master's programme are generally the norm (Nuffic, 2025a).

In profiling the humanities provision of the four ancient universities of Scotland, it must be noted that one key shared feature is that each institution's traditional first degree in arts and humanities is the so-called Scottish MA (Bell, 2000, p. 168). This is a four-year honours degree which, despite carrying the title of Master of Arts, is in fact an undergraduate-level qualification[2]. To avoid confusion with postgraduate taught MA degrees offered elsewhere in the United Kingdom, taught postgraduate degrees in humanities subjects at the four ancient universities use different nomenclature and are thus typically designated as either Master of Letters (MLitt) or Master of Science (MSc) qualifications (Nuffic, 2025b).

In common with many British universities, the European Credit and Transfer System (ECTS) is not widely utilised in Scotland; rather, the Scottish Credit and Qualification Framework (SCQF) is used instead, with a full semester of study comprising 60 SCQF credits, or 30 ECTS. In Scotland, the majority of full-time taught master's degrees typically comprise a full year of study—two taught semesters plus a dissertation completed over the summer. Thus, this leads to a total credit volume of 180 SCQF credits, or 90 ECTS. Depending on the university and programme, postgraduate certificate (PGCert) or postgraduate diploma (PGDip) qualifications may be available to students as exit awards on certain programmes, or as standalone credentials in their own right. This is generally subject to the successful completion of taught courses representing the full-time equivalent of one semester (60 credits, 30 SCQF ECTS) in the case of the PGCert, or of two semesters (120 SCQF credits, 60 ECTS) in the case of the PGDip (for more information, see SCQF, 2025).

Turning to the specific aims of this study, Table 1 below provides more information about the humanities-based provision and relevant administrative structure of the four institutions which are analysed in this article, presented in chronological order by year of foundation.

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[2]   For historical reasons, the University of Dundee (founded 1967) also awards the Scottish MA as an undergraduate degree owing to the fact that the then University College Dundee was part of the University of St Andrews between 1897 and 1967 (University of Dundee, 2017).

Table 1. Relevant information about the four ancient universities of Scotland

Institution	Year founded	Total student numbers	Relevant Faculty/ College	Relevant Schools
University of St Andrews	1413	10,234	Faculty of Arts	Art History; Classics; Economics and Finance; English; History; International Relations; Management; Modern Languages; Philosophical, Anthropological, and Film Studies
University of Glasgow	1451	c. 43,000	College of Arts & Humanities	Critical Studies; Culture and Creative Arts; Humanities; Modern Languages and Cultures
University of Aberdeen	1495	c. 14,000	-	Divinity, History, Philosophy and Art History; Language, Literature, Music and Visual Culture
University of Edinburgh	1583	49,065	College of Arts, Humanities and Social Sciences	Business School; Divinity; Economics; Edinburgh College of Art; Health in Social Science; History, Classics and Archaeology; Law; Literatures, Languages and Cultures; Moray House School of Education and Sport; Philosophy, Psychology and Language Sciences; Social and Political Sciences

Source: The author, based on University of St Andrews (2025a; 2025b), University of Glasgow (2025a; 2025b), University of Aberdeen (2025a; 2025b), and University of Edinburgh (2025a; 2025b).

Despite being of similar age, the universities vary considerably in their composition as the above table demonstrates. Though it is the oldest institution, St Andrews has the lowest number of student enrolments, which can be

contrasted with the large student bodies of big urban universities such as Glasgow and Edinburgh. In terms of the organisational structure regarding humanities provision, only one university (St Andrews) has retained the traditional Faculty of Arts. Edinburgh and Glasgow have both opted for broader colleges which bring together a wider range of subjects and disciplines, thus reflecting the intricate relationships and the often-unclear boundaries between the humanities, arts, and social sciences. Aberdeen appears to have foregone the faculty or college structures, opting for the nomenclature of "Schools". Indeed, St Andrews and Edinburgh have also seemingly adopted this approach, with the named entities clearly relating to the specific humanities and social sciences taught (for example, such as "History, Classics and Archaeology" or "Philosophical, Anthropological, and Film Studies", etc.). At Glasgow, some the titles of individual schools (save for 'Modern Languages and Cultures') are perhaps less self-explanatory. Further investigation, though, reveals that the Schools of Critical Studies teaches English language & linguistics, Scottish and English literature, and creative writing (University of Glasgow, 2025c); the School of Culture and Creative Arts is responsible for subject areas including art history, music, theatre studies, creative and cultural heritage and policy, and film and television studies (University of Glasgow, 2025d); and the School of Humanities teaches inter alia archaeology, classics, history, philosophy, as well as Gaelic and Celtic studies (University of Glasgow, 2025e).

To summarise briefly at this point, these varied offerings demonstrate the broad range of humanities subjects currently available at Scotland's four oldest universities. However, as deeper examination of the relevant online provision will detail in greater depth, it remains to be seen whether this breadth is reflected in the various online taught postgraduate programmes on offer at the present time.

Methodology and approach

In common with the author's previous studies which evaluated the portrayal of digital aspects in the prospectus for postgraduate courses in TESOL and in

interpreting (Hoyte-West, 2024b; 2024c), this study adopts a similar approach. The principal aim, therefore, is to look at whether the four ancient universities offer online taught postgraduate options in the humanities; what types of subject areas are available; the level of qualifications on offer (PGCert, PGDip, MSc/MLitt); and a brief comparative overview of the content of the relevant programmes.

In deciding what was to be designated as the humanities for the purposes of this analysis, the encyclopaedia and dictionary definitions offered at the beginning of this article can be reiterated (Encyclopaedia Britannica, 2025; Cambridge Dictionary, 2025). Accordingly, this meant a primary focus on the more limited domain of historical, philosophical, philological, and literary subjects, though a holistic approach also enabled other relevant subjects, including interdisciplinary or multidisciplinary fields, to be included where relevant.

As with the previous publications, the online postgraduate prospectuses for the four universities were consulted, and thus a qualitative desk-based methodological approach was employed (Bassot, 2022). Given the date of enquiry was in mid-March 2025, this meant that the qualifications and programmes listed were generally for student entry in autumn 2025—i.e., at the beginning of the 2025/2026 academic year. These online portals were analysed by the researcher, and it was observed that there were several differences—for example, sometimes the available programmes were arranged thematically by subject areas, and at other times in alphabetical order or by teaching modality (e.g., in-person/online). Having consulted these portals, a list of the humanities-based offerings was compiled and then evaluated by the researcher as to their relevance to the current project.

Research findings

In presenting the findings in chronological order of the university's foundation, the results for the St Andrews—via the website's course search function (University of St Andrews, 2025c) with the terms "postgraduate" and

"online"—returned a total of 22 items on the day of consultation, of which two could be said to be directly linked to humanities-linked provision. These were the online programmes in Digital Art History, offered at the PGCert, PGDip, and MLitt level (University of St Andrews, 2025d), as well as the Global Digital Humanities programmes, which also offered the same three qualification options (University of St Andrews, 2025e). As the titles suggest, both programmes were concerned with bringing together digital approaches to the field and incorporated relevant modules in computer sciences. In the case of the latter, modules focusing on philological and literary subjects included offerings in 'Digital Global Literatures', which sought to allow "students to enhance the analysis and presentation of literary texts with advanced digital and computational techniques" and modules in 'Digital Modern Languages' and 'Memory and Storytelling in the Digital Age', focusing on the intersection of technology with the language industry, narratives, and cultural practices (University of St Andrews, 2025e). Humanities-related provision was also identified as a component of several other degrees, such as the online MLitt degree (with PGDip option) in Bible and Contemporary World, offered by the School of Divinity and which aimed to link "biblical and theological studies with other disciplines in the arts, humanities and social sciences", including via a core module in Theology and Arts which linked Christianity with music, literary studies, and fine art (University of St Andrews, 2025f). In addition, the online MLitt in Iranian Studies also contained modules on the history of Iran and Persia, as well as the opportunity for Persian language tuition at different levels (University of St Andrews, 2025g). Further offerings with some broader humanities-linked content include the postgraduate programme (PGCert, PGDip, MLitt) in Museums, Heritage and Society (University of St Andrews, 2025h). Though exact module information for the 2025/26 academic year appeared not be available at the time of consultation, previous modules relevant to the humanities focused on intangible cultural heritage, curation, and ethics. The same is true for the PGCert in Sacred Music, which included a module on the relevant historical and contemporary repertoire (University of St Andrews, 2025i). And the School of Medicine also offered a standalone online module on 'Health Humanities Approaches within Health Professions

Education', where participants could discover ways of incorporating the humanities into the teaching of healthcare-related subjects (University of St Andrews, 2025j).

Turning to the University of Glasgow, the dedicated page for online postgraduate programmes comprised 28 entries on the day of consultation (University of Glasgow, 2025e); however, the majority seemed to be focused on education studies and the sciences, including medicine. In terms of the humanities, an online MLitt in Creative Writing was listed (University of Glasgow, 2025f), as was a programme in Global Gender History with options for study at the PGCert, PGDip, and MSc level (University of Glasgow, 2025g). Yet humanities provision was also available elsewhere as, for example, in the programme on the PGCert/PGDip/MSc in End of Life Studies (University of Glasgow, 2025h). Though aimed at health professionals, it contained a module on the 'Cultural Representation of Death and Dying'. In the accompanying description of the latter, it was noted that the course looked at how these phenomena were portrayed in literature, the visual arts, and popular culture over the past five decades. It noted that participants would also "be introduced to methods of visual and literary analysis and learn to identify specific cultural tropes used to represent the end of life", as well as using examples "from different artistic genres and different countries" before embarking on a creative work of their own (University of Glasgow, 2025i).

The website of the University of Aberdeen also offers a dedicated sub-section for online study (University of Aberdeen, 2025c)—in this instance, selecting the "history and society" alongside the "postgraduate" option revealed seven results (out of 49) linked to the humanities under the criteria for this article (one, the PGDip in New Testament in Early Christianity, appeared to fall more under the domain of theological studies). Two were related to the intersection of the humanities with theology—the MLitt in Christianity and Visual Arts (also available with PGCert and PGDip possibilities) (University of Aberdeen, 2025d) and the Master of Theology (MTh) in Theology and Disability (also with PGCert and PGDip exit awards) (University of Aberdeen, 2025e). Further linked offerings included programmes to cultural heritage, such as the PGCert in Heritage and Memory Studies (University of Aberdeen, 2025f) as well as the MLitt in Scottish

Heritage, the constituent components of which are also available as short courses (University of Aberdeen, 2025g). Humanities-based offerings are also available in the MLitt in Philosophy and Society, which seeks to open up philosophy to wider audiences in an applied manner and is also available in PGDip, PGCert, and short course options (University of Aberdeen, 2025h), the PGCert in Visual and Popular Culture (University of Aberdeen, 2025i), and the MSc in Translation Studies (also with PGCert and PGDip variants), which in addition to the requisite theoretical and practical skills in technical translation also incorporated a module in literary translation (University of Aberdeen, 2025j).

Listed in alphabetical order, the University of Edinburgh's dedicated page of online postgraduate programmes included over eighty-five offerings (University of Edinburgh, 2025c), primarily in social sciences, medicine, and education studies. Of these, seven programmes were found to be directly relevant to the humanities-related criteria of this study. Two involved named disciplines from the humanities—the MSc in History (University of Edinburgh, 2025d) and the MSc in Ancient Worlds (Archaeology and Classics) (University of Edinburgh, 2025e)—and the PGCert/PGDip/MSc in Epistemology, Ethics and Mind, which focused on philosophical aspects (University of Edinburgh, 2025f). The remaining examples involved interdisciplinary collaboration via the Edinburgh Futures Institute (University of Edinburgh, 2025g), an umbrella initiative involving several Schools within the College of Arts, Humanities, and Social Sciences listed above (see Table 1). Of its programmes, four were found particularly pertinent—the MSc in Philosophy, Science and Religion (which also offered PGCert and PGDip options) (University of Edinburgh, 2025h); the MSc (and PGCert/PGDip) in Cultural Heritage Futures (University of Edinburgh, 2025i); the MSc (with PGCert and PGDip options) in Data and Artificial Intelligence Ethics (University of Edinburgh, 2025j); and the MSc in Narrative Futures: Art, Data, Society, which revolves around the study of narratives and how they can be used and function in different contexts (University of Edinburgh, 2025k). A taught online postgraduate programme in Science Communication was also found, but although involving the written and spoken word, its focus solely on the sciences (rather than interdisciplinary enquiry) meant that it was judged to be outside of this analysis.

Discussion and conclusions

Table 2. Online taught postgraduate provision in the humanities at the four ancient universities of Scotland

Institution	Programme
University of St Andrews	PGCert/PGDip/MLitt Digital Art History, PGCert/PGDip/MLitt Digital Humanities PGDip/MLitt Bible and Contemporary World, MLitt Iranian Studies (PGCert/PGDip/MLitt Museums, Heritage and Society) (PGCert Sacred Music)
University of Glasgow	MLitt Creative Writing PGCert/PGDip/MLitt Global Gender History (PGCert/PGDip/MSc End of Life Studies)
University of Aberdeen	MLitt in Scottish Heritage PGCert Heritage and Memory Studies PGCert Visual and Popular Culture PGCert/PGDip/MLitt Christianity and Visual Arts PGCert/PGDip/MLitt Philosophy and Society PGCert/PGDip/MSc Translation Studies PGCert/PGDip/MTh Theology and Disability
University of Edinburgh	MSc Ancient Worlds (Archaeology and Classics) PGCert/PGDip/MSc Data and Artificial Intelligence Ethics PGCert/PGDip/MSc Epistemology, Ethics and Mind MSc History MSc Narrative Futures: Art, Data, Society PGCert/PGDip/MSc Cultural Heritage Futures PGCert/PGDip/MSc Philosophy, Science and Religion

Source: The author based on University of St Andrews (2025d-h), University of Glasgow (2025f-i), University of Aberdeen (2025d-j), and University of Edinburgh (2025d-k).

Before discussing the findings and offering some valedictory remarks, Table 2 outlines the main relevant taught postgraduate qualifications in the humanities discussed in this section (individual modules were not listed). In general terms, it is clear that all four of the ancient universities do appear to have provision in humanities-based subjects—however, this does vary. During the data gathering procedure, it was noted that the larger institutions often have significant

offerings in the fields of education, medicine, and healthcare; indeed, this may be due to the nature of those regulated professions, where continuing professional development (CPD) or similar may be recommended or even mandatory for practitioners (e.g., see Karas et al., 2020).

With regard to the types of qualifications offered, the majority of programmes offered full qualifications at the master's (MSc, MLitt, or MTh) level, with the possibility for exit awards at the postgraduate certificate or postgraduate diploma level. In addition, there were also several standalone PGCert or PGDip certifications on offer, as well as the possibility of taking individual modules as short courses.

Turning to the subjects falling under the auspices of the humanities, this study sought to highlight the presence of historical, literary, philosophical, and philological disciplines in the online taught postgraduate offerings. As the foregoing has outlined, it was relatively rare to find qualifications with the title of a named discipline (e.g., 'History'). What was noticeable was a tendency towards interdisciplinary or multidisciplinary approaches—for example, through offering programmes which brought together different subject areas, such as philosophy and society, theology and the arts, etc. This was also highlighted in the use of humanities in modules within broader programmes aimed at other professionals, such as doctors or other healthcare professionals. A further factor was the incorporation of digital approaches to the humanities to deal with the ever-changing world (e.g., see Luhmann & Burghardt, 2022), and other pioneering specialisms which draw on diverse subject areas from the humanities and beyond. Though a full programme in translation studies and modular options in literature and language acquisition were available, the relative lack of full qualifications focusing solely on linguistic or literary studies (in English and in other languages) could perhaps be an area for further development.

At this point, it is important to underline that the observations and analysis of the taught online postgraduate provision in humanities at the four ancient universities have been subject to certain limitations, which could indeed provide the impetus for more research. Indeed, many of the limitations implied by a desk-based study—similarly to the author's prior work (Hoyte-West, 2023a; 2024b; 2024c)—could be overcome by involving the personnel involved—i.e., by talking

to and conducting interviews with staff members concerned with the creation and implementation of these programmes, as well as potentially with students and alumni of these online humanities-based postgraduate qualifications. In addition, further comparative work could expand the scope to examine the online postgraduate provision in the humanities of all of Scotland's universities, as well as different level of study (e.g., undergraduate, microcredentials, and MOOCs). And noting the more limited notion of the humanities adopted for the purposes of this study, the marked multidisciplinary interconnection between the different subject areas offered in the online postgraduate programmes has also illustrated the blurring of the disciplinary lines between the humanities, social sciences, and even beyond.

It is also important to highlight that there can be a variety of reasons underpinning the creation and implementation of online postgraduate programmes. These can, for example, include the particular interests and motivations of individual staff members (for example, in digital humanities), given that the design of bespoke materials often can require significant time, effort, and other resources. In addition, as Fawns, Gallagher, and Bayne (2021) highlight in their case study relating to the online provision at the University of Edinburgh, there are often a range of different requirements to be met, ranging from pedagogical aspects to institutional factors.

To summarise, as was mentioned at the outset of this article, the global higher education environment—and the role of the humanities therein—is changing rapidly. In offering this overview of the relevant online taught postgraduate provision at the four oldest universities in Scotland, it demonstrates that there a small but steady number of location-independent humanities programmes taught in English at high-quality institutions are available, covering a range of levels, subject areas, and with provision for future needs. As such, in terms of providing online postgraduate humanities education, it ensures that Scotland's four ancient universities continue to remain relevant for the opportunities and challenges that our present century continues to bring us.

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