

Exploring New Teaching and Research Perspectives in the Humanities

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Abstract

This study provides new perspectives on looking at humanities discipline. It argues that the humanities have transformative powers making vital societal contributions to academia. Academic research is no longer solely the pursuit of individual intellectual curiosity but is driven by national priorities tied to strategies of economic growth and competitiveness. Its importance derives primarily from the translation of knowledge into new products and services. This instrumentalist environment has created a disciplinary hierarchy in which the humanities have struggled for recognition and appreciation under pressure to demonstrate value and relevance. The humanities have long had a societal mission in the belief that society can only benefit from the pursuit of knowledge and the scholarship that they generate. This study concludes that this certainty faces challenges from the dominant knowledge economic policy paradigm with its strong focus on measurable impacts.

Key words: Humanities; Knowledge economy; Universities; Curricula; Research; Innovation

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INTRODUCTION

The global shift towards innovation and technological development and the rapid changes in the global economy have changed the focus of most African

universities towards Science Technology Engineering and Mathematics (STEM) subjects (Reiter, 2017). This shift to STEM-focused education has challenged the role of the humanities in African university education. As a consequence of the recent global recession, a new “crisis in the humanities” has been declared, and ideas of how best to defend the humanities have been vigorously debated. The overwhelming emphasis on STEM disciplines has pushed the humanities and human sciences off to the side or even completely out of the picture in some African universities. This proposal argues that in an ever-changing technology-focused world, the humanities are needed in our universities now more than ever to provide balance and perspective. The Humanities strengthen our global view, broaden our intellectual foundation, teach us to communicate clearly, help us to develop creative and critical thinking skills, teach us to be problem solvers, create engaged citizens and thinkers, reinforce cultural and ethical responsibilities and values, help us to understand the impact that science, technology, and medicine have had on society, and create well-rounded academics, students and thinkers.

Humanities education and research have been a critical foundation of our society for centuries. Disciplines such as history, literature, and philosophy have shaped institutions and policy debates and attracted generations of students seeking to understand more about how societies function and change. However, this proposal argues that changing frameworks for understanding social value and the expansion of tertiary education disciplines over time have affected perceptions of the importance of the Humanities (Moahi, 2010).

Studies of literature, history, languages, cultures, philosophy, the arts, and other humanities subjects have been deprioritized by policy-makers and even by some university officials. The humanities consistently appear at the bottom of any list of national goals, if indeed they appear at all. The marginalization of the humanities must be remedied because no knowledge-

led development strategy can succeed without a solid core of humanistic understanding and humane values. Reinvigorating the Humanities is a necessary first step for inspiring innovation in all fields of endeavor critical to development, such as the prudent, ethical management of natural resources and civic dialogue in the public sphere. The crisis in the humanities is reflected in declining student enrolments, falling graduations, and decreasing government funding in most African universities (Ryff, 2019). The Humanities are in a state of intellectual stagnation and, singular innovations notwithstanding, have been moribund in most African universities since the beginning of the 21st century. The decline of the Humanities has many causes including government policy and funding, institutional choices and decision-making, school guidance and counseling, and parental and student preferences. The low proportion of academic staff with doctorates means that the institutional capacity to reproduce and replace high-level scholars and scholars in the Humanities remains compromised into the near future. The performance and prospects of the Humanities vary considerably across different fields of study (theology and education versus law and languages, for example), and this means that any interventions will require fine-tuned strategies among these fields rather than a blunt instrument of policy change for the humanities as a whole.

METHODOLOGY

This study is a review of literature from previous studies that have been conducted by various scholars in other universities on the collapse of the humanities as a discipline.

LITERATURE REVIEW AND THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

This study will rely on Human Capital theory, Constructivist Learning Theory, and the Helical model.

Human Capital Theory

The Humanities have long had a societal mission in the belief that society can only benefit from the pursuit of knowledge and the scholarship that they generate. Today, much of that certainty faces challenges from the dominant “knowledge economy” policy paradigm, with its strong focus on “measurable ‘impacts’” (Belfiore and Bennett, 2007, p135). As nations prioritize economic recovery and “highly applied skills suited to profit-making” and employability, there is a move to “cut away all useless things to stay competitive in the global market” (Nussbaum, 2010: 2). This raises the question of what the effects of these pressures on humanities research policies and activities, and whether these disciplines are

unfairly disadvantaged by this shift in policy emphasis. Human capital theory, which has underpinned most policy developments over recent decades, tends to see people primarily as economic entities (Becker, 1964, 1993). Bourdieu (1986) argued that human capital is a more dynamic concept, including cultural capital, social capital, economic capital, and symbolic capital. It is impossible to account for the structure and functioning of the social world unless one reintroduces capital in all its forms and not solely in the one form recognized by economic theory. Arguably, tensions between these two models of the “structure and functioning” of the social and economic world lie at the heart of the policy tensions illuminated above. This, in turn, is reflected in the debate around research outlets, outputs, outcomes, and impact, and how that is valued, assessed, measured, and funded (Hazelkon, 2013).

One of the most important ideas in labor economics is to think of the set of marketable skills of workers as a form of capital in which workers make a variety of investments. This perspective is important in understanding both investment incentives and the structure of wages and earnings. Loosely speaking, human capital corresponds to any stock of knowledge or characteristics the worker has (either innate or acquired) that contributes to his or her “productivity”. This definition is broad, and it has both advantages and disadvantages. The advantages are clear: it enables us to think of not only the years of schooling but also of a variety of other characteristics as part of human capital investments. These include school quality, training, attitudes towards work, etc. Using this type of reasoning, one can make some progress towards understanding some of the differences in earnings across workers that are not accounted for by schooling differences alone. The standard approach in labor economics views human capital as a set of skills/characteristics that increase a worker’s productivity. This is a useful starting place, and for most practical purposes quite sufficient.

The Helical Model and Constructivist Learning Theory

The Helical Model, developed by Gigi Carunungan (2015), is a learning process guiding the curriculum along the Constructivist framework comprised of five stages of learning: Play, Explore, Connect, Imagine, and Remember. Using this model, students are guided through a multi-dimensional learning experience that incorporates hands-on activities and interactive projects that engage them in expanding and applying knowledge across multiple subjects. In this Constructivist-based learning environment, where students learn by doing, the students are active participants in their accumulation of knowledge. Students explore questions with a whole-brain learning approach that enables them to formulate hypotheses, connect the news with the known, extract concepts and theories from data, and form meaning from engagement

with the world around them. Integral to this process is the student's ability to communicate and collaborate with peers and educators while also refining their mastery of socio-emotional skills essential to success in future endeavors.

The Helical Model uses multisensory and integrated arts activities to allow learners of all styles to actively participate in subject matter exploration, application, and mastery through a progression of learning activities which include kinaesthetic, visual, and verbal lesson strategies. Scientific research indicates that learning through active processes such as the Helical Model and Constructivist Learning Theory helps students' brains to construct understanding by building and refining connections among neurons (Gülpinar, 2005), and that when students engage in interactive lessons that focus on learning for meaning, greater retention, recall and application of information and ideas are found (Bransford, 2004). Key to this process is a multi-modality curricular design that addresses different learning styles using collective class learning experiences where students are given the skill, experience, and knowledge to extrapolate their theories and engage in critical conversations.

TEACHING

Humanities have historically formed the foundation for the model of learning used in higher education, where transferrable skills such as problem-solving, critical thinking, and communication are recognized as public good. These skills and the public values they provide—such as the capacity for evaluating evidence and argument, making informed choices, creative thinking, and problem-solving—have immense utilitarian benefits. However, the need to demonstrate the impact and value of Humanities in African universities education to society and the economy has intensified. Non-democratic societies that previously focused one-sidedly on the promotion of technical skills are increasingly recognizing the value of the Humanities in fostering innovation and understanding in a globalized world (Delbanco, 2013). For example, in a 2012 Humanities Educators' Conference with the theme "Fostering Critical Thinking, Inspiring Active Learning", the Minister for Education in Singapore, Heng Swee Keat, declared:

Humanities educators play a vital role in preparing our young people as Singaporeans with a global outlook. Our students need civic literacy, global awareness, and cross-cultural skills so that they can interact with people of diverse backgrounds with confidence and empathy. They should also be able to think critically and creatively when solving problems at work and in life and tackle problems that do not even exist today (Keat, 2013).

Debates about what the humanities are for and what they should teach and foster in universities seem to

have become ubiquitous in the last decade (Spencer, 2014). From this has come a burgeoning literature expressing why the Humanities "matter" (Spencer, 2014). Maintaining a legitimate sense of place within universities at the same time as responding to transformations in both our research processes and teaching environments has created, in some, a sense of crisis. For others, however, it presents an opportunity to revisit the material world within the Humanities as well as the space for propagating new genres and disciplines and reforming the undergraduate curriculum (Spencer, 2014). In responding to the identification of where enhancements to learning and teaching need to occur, if we are to attend effectively to the, "why the humanities matter" agendas, it has provided fertile fields from which to harvest swathes of qualitative data (Spencer, 2014). This is perhaps particularly true of those of us who work in the advancement of higher education but are still embedded/wedded to our work in the Humanities disciplines in the traditional sense. For all that, the perception of a crisis, or at least the need to change, drives an underlying sense of urgency.

CURRICULA AND CURRICULUM REDESIGN

Redesigning curricula is in itself a predicate of change, since it offers the opportunity to reflect on past practice and assumptions, usually through the stimuli of student and staff feedback on the one hand, and research-generated change on the other. At the same time, because it is essential to conceive of the student as an active participant, curricula need to be redesigned with the desiderata that the students following the curriculum should be stimulated by it. For some, or perhaps now only a benighted few, curriculum design is an odd, new concept. The implications for teaching and learning in general are considerable, but there are also very particular implications for curriculum design. Without a doubt, it is usually the first level of a program that deserves the most attention in all curriculum design activities.

Most academics have a clear idea about where they want their students to be upon completion of the degree, and their understanding of their discipline is such that they are confident about how a graduate in that discipline should be defined. Much less certainty now attends to the understanding of how undergraduates should begin their degrees, and the reasons for this are manifold. First, the threshold of a student's knowledge and abilities is no longer assumed to be stable or held in common (Haslem, 1998: 117–18). Second, every department will have its understanding of the foundational experience required by the students. Third, institutional infrastructures and structures—particularly those determined by modular schemes—would exert a strong logistical influence over what is possible.

RESEARCH

Research undertaken in the Humanities has contributed to economic and social progress. For example, the study of anthropology and international relations has helped us to better understand political, social, and development issues with implications for economic development and international aid policy; indigenous studies and international studies contend with the topical issues of racism and cross-cultural communication. This research has applications in both the public and private sectors. Wright (2007) states that the humanities, and by extension humanities research, are important because they enable an understanding of what makes us human and enable us to handle change that is a constant in our lives and which is accelerated by scientific discovery and technology. Further, the Nairobi Report of 2009 states that the humanities and social sciences are critical for development.

Humanities and social science research also have an important role to play in the innovation system, just as much as research in science and technology (Bakhshi, *et al*, 2008). Contrary to conventional belief, the natural sciences, the humanities, and social sciences are complementary and provide a broad way of considering innovation, its impact, and its acceptability to society. The relationship between these areas is not hierarchical as might be suggested by the funding opportunities and general belief that innovation can only be driven by knowledge generated in science and technology research. Whilst science and technology research might generate innovation, it is humanities and social science research that will ask fundamental questions about the acceptability of an innovation and therefore inform the public and thus address the social and ethical dimensions of an innovation (Mette, 2008). The public is not only interested in the technical scientific facts but the wider implications of the technology as well. The humanities and social sciences provide the avenue for a critical assessment of any innovation to inform the public such that they can make informed judgments. Humanities and social sciences research also has a role to play in business and in generating income as shown by the results of a DEA study carried out in Denmark. The study surveyed 100 companies about their challenges and needs to which Humanities and Social Sciences research could help provide solutions. The results came up with two themes that Humanities and Social Sciences researchers could consider.

(a) Research in the humanities and social sciences has an impact on policymakers and the public because it can contribute to an understanding of the human and social side of any phenomenon. As such, research should, therefore, inform policy making.

(b) Humanities research, in particular, is viewed as research into esoteric issues that have no bearing on real life. According to the British Academy Report (2008), the

full value of humanities and social sciences research has yet to be realized by policy-makers. This is because they may not be aware of the available research and humanities and social science researchers may not have the networks that would make their research known.

Ph.D. Publications

African universities in the 21st century need high-quality Humanities research and teaching now more than ever. The need has to do with the undergraduate education of tens of thousands of young Africans each year. It also has to do with how the kind of knowledge borne of the humanities can contribute to a clearer, more historically informed, and more ethical understanding of the problems that face Africa. This proposal will recommend changing the Ph.D. programs and reforming doctoral training so that it leads to a multiplicity of career paths instead of only one. To consider the intellectual gifts, work ethic, deep learning, and high-level skills of Ph.D. candidates is to recognize the wisdom of maintaining and reforming the Ph.D. programs that prepare such people for their working lives in Africa (The Forum on the Humanities in Africa of the African Humanities Program, 2014). New Ph.D. programs should be reoriented toward active participation in the world, should promote collaborative and interdisciplinary research, and should develop new kinds of teaching, research, and research deliverables— websites, film, editions, translations, and so on, in addition to books and articles. There is also a need to replace the PhD dissertation with a coherent ensemble of scholarly projects (Institute for the Public Life of Arts and Ideas, 2013). This study proposes two new model PhD programs—the Workshop PhD and the PhD in Applied Humanities.

COLLABORATION

The era of the solitary Humanist is waning. The recent push toward collaborative, team-based research that reaches across academic networks and between academic and non-academic fields has begun to reorient humanities scholarships. The ambition, renewed collegiality, and vitality of projects with several or even dozens of researchers working in a range of related disciplines is invigorating and should serve as a model for the training of new scholars. Just as students should be involved in major undertakings by senior academics, so too should they be encouraged to think about the collaborative possibilities for their work. Team building among colleagues and partners as well as the requirements of major project management provide valuable experience whatever the students' professional futures. Networks that include researchers at all stages of their careers also create a robust system of mentorship with graduate students serving as mentors to undergraduates while also having the advantage of guidance from more senior scholars.

DIGITAL HUMANITIES

Digital Humanities is an umbrella term to include different practices, methodologies, technologies, and research strategies for humanists. They are the result of a dynamic dialogue between diverse and emerging technologies and the humanities. Digital Humanities is a diverse and still emerging field that lies at the intersection of ICT and Humanities, and which is being continually articulated by scholars and practitioners across a range of disciplines (Svensson & Goldberg, 2015; Gardiner & Musto, 2015; Schreibman, Siemens, & Unsworth, 2016). The following examples of current areas and topics of research may fall within this scope: text-analytic techniques, categorization, data mining; Social Network Analysis (SNA) and bibliometric; metadata and tagging; Geographic Information Systems (GIS); multimedia and interactive games; visualization; media.

The digital transformation of research and its resources means that many of the artifacts, documents, materials, etc. That interest in humanities research can now be combined in new and innovative ways. Digital transformations have brought about new actors and practices in all areas of research culture. More and more cultural objects are integrated into the digital space through processes of datafication (Kitchin, 2014), while infrastructures working with these digital objects provide a sense of stability and continuity (Edwards et al., 2009). At the same time, digital transformations offer new possibilities for humanities research to reassemble new socio-technical methods and devices (Ruppert et al., 2013) to explore society and culture. Due to the digital transformations, (big) data and information have become central to the study of culture and society. Big data is not limited to science and large-scale enterprises. With more than 7 billion people worldwide, large amounts of data are produced in social and cultural interactions, while we can look back onto several thousand years of human history that have produced vast amounts of cultural records.

Humanities Research Infrastructure

Humanities research infrastructures manage, organize and distribute this kind of information and many more data objects as they become relevant for social and cultural research. Edwards has explored infrastructure as a global socio-technical system and as a characteristic of modern society, where one lives within and using infrastructure (Edwards et al., 2009). Research infrastructure, in particular, helps disciplines to redefine themselves around a shared set of devices that support their research. Humanities research infrastructure has been theorized as digital ecosystems without a center and constituted through heavily interconnected online platforms (Anderson and Blanke, 2012).

Along these lines, the European Commission defines research infrastructures as “facilities, resources or services

of a unique nature that have been identified by research communities to conduct top-level activities in their fields. They may be single-sited, distributed, or virtual.” (ESFRI, 2010). Research infrastructure often produces large amounts of data requiring data management. In the case of Humanities research infrastructure, much of the data for integration is not a product of the infrastructure itself but is the primary source materials, produced as a result of the activities of cultural heritage institutions; mostly in archives and libraries. Large-scale digitization efforts have recently begun to create digital surrogates for human history.

Virtual Learning Environments (VLEs) and other electronic resources for learning

In recent years, a great many universities in the UK and elsewhere have adopted the VLE as a primary tool in delivering learning materials to students across the institution. In the arts, humanities, and social sciences, the extent of such adoption by academics has been variable. Some tutors have embraced the VLE with great enthusiasm and innovation; some have been more skeptical, and some are simply reluctant. Debates about the advantages and drawbacks of VLEs have been structured by old and new thinking: old thinking has expressed concern that the VLE (and other electronic resources) makes information too quickly attainable, thereby discouraging reflection, consideration, and synthesis (at its most extreme this line of thought argues that information is replacing knowledge); new thinking expresses concerns that younger students are increasing to be understood as ‘digital natives’ and that their tutors may be either ‘digital immigrants’ or even digital illiterates. Further concerns are expressed in both new and old thinking that the speed of developments in digital environments and the predominance and vigor of peer-to-peer interactions in the virtual spaces of the new social software are transforming the nature of literacy and understanding (Brown & Duguid, 2002; Owen, 2004; Prensky, 2001).

CONCLUSIONS

The humanities discipline provides an understanding of the human condition, of society, and of changes occurring in society and how they affect humans. Despite this, the role of humanities research tends to go largely unrecognized and undervalued. Discussions of the “knowledge society” tend to focus on science and technology research as the way to build and develop nations towards becoming knowledge societies. The role that humanities can play in innovation; policy making; business and economy; and in addressing societal problems are not generally recognized by humanities and social sciences researchers themselves, their institutions, and, society. Research in the humanities has an impact on policymakers and the public because

it can contribute to an understanding of the human and social side of any phenomenon. As such, research should, therefore, inform policy making. However, such research does not receive much attention in general; humanities research, in particular, is viewed as research into esoteric issues that have no bearing on real life. The full value of humanities is yet to be realized by policy-makers. This is because they may not be aware of the available research and humanities researchers may not have the networks that would make their research known. Opportunities have been identified that can be seized to make research visible by ensuring that it answers the needs of society and policymakers, and that there is more collaboration, partnership, and interdisciplinary research.

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