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Humanities for the Future: a new European Agenda

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European
Humanities
Conference



Youth Forum on the Future of the Humanities

Lisbon, Portugal, 4 May 2021

Humanities for the Future: a new European Agenda

Executive Summary

We, Young or Early Career Researchers in the Humanities, gathered in the Youth Forum on the Future of the Humanities, held in Lisbon on 4 May 2021 as part of the European Humanities Conference 2021,

Considering that the Humanities have an enormously important role to play in society insofar as they foster the development of a type of rationality usually not emphasized in other disciplines, by cultivating memory of the past, empathy and communication, fostering a multiplicity of values, normative assessment, critical thinking and democratic deliberation, and by cherishing diversity;

Stressing that today the field of the Humanities is affected by a lack of recognition on the part of the general public and of many public and private stakeholders and institutions, and that this flawed perception of the Humanities' societal impact should be addressed and corrected;

Alerting that the current institutional framework guiding the functioning of academia and research funding brings significant challenges to researchers and scholars, in terms of access to funding, career stability and evaluation and that while these challenges affect all research fields, they are felt more acutely by early-career researchers, especially in fields, like the Humanities, that are often not deemed a priority by funding bodies;

Suggesting that transnational cooperation between researchers and institutions as well as a stronger role played by the EU in this process are crucial to properly address the abovementioned challenges, which would imply a change in the paradigm of education and research, a transformation that within a supranational entity such as the EU, cannot be carried out by individual researchers, universities, national funding bodies or governments:



1. Call on higher education institutions, research centres and similar scholarly bodies to:
 - Avoid the pitfalls of a model of narrow monodisciplinary specialization by fostering true inter- and transdisciplinary research and education;
 - Recognize the plurality of meaningful traditions in knowledge production and thus to further the efforts to diversify and decolonize the curricula.
2. Call on foundations, councils, sponsors and other funding bodies, both at a national and European level to:
 - Resist the temptation of privileging “applied” over “fundamental” research, including the tendency to “invest” in fields or projects due to their alleged potentiality to generate profit, in the definition of their research priorities and allocation of funds;
 - Safeguard the autonomy of researchers by providing them with the capacity to choose the topics and methodologies of their work in a flexible fashion;
 - Implement context-specific assessment of research for each field without relying disproportionately on quantitative or bibliometric indicators.
3. Call on EU member states and the European Commission to:
 - Deepen their commitment to investment in research and innovation, wagering that knowledge will always be an integral part of the solution for the (health, economic, social and other) crises affecting the continent and the world;
 - Commit to tackling the problem of career stability in research, studying new ways to establish proper research careers in the EU, including the creation of an institutional framework to implement the much-needed unified European research career and incentivize institutions to reduce the levels of precarity of early-career researchers, safe-guarding leaves (maternity, sick, unemployment, etc.);
 - Recognize the central role the Humanities play in preserving our shared human heritage for posterity and for shaping the future of our societies.
4. Call on researchers, scholars and funding institutions in the Humanities to closely adhere to and support the principles of open access free of charges for both authors and readers, and openness to the world in the dissemination and public engagement of their research, thus helping institutions and society at large to have a proper understanding of their work and its societal contributions.



5. Call on young or early career researchers and scholars in the Humanities to:

- At a national level, promote and where possible establish institutional events to further the discussion avenues on the Future of the Humanities, actively bridging the Humanities with other knowledge fields and encouraging a horizontal exchange of ideas;
- Mobilize at a transnational level in order to make their voices heard similarly to the effort undertaken by this Youth Forum, and consider setting up a Network of Young and Early Career Researchers in the Humanities.

Report

We, the participants of the Youth Forum on the Future of the Humanities, held in Lisbon on 4 May 2021 as part of the European Humanities Conference 2021 (5-7 May 2021), in our capacity as young or early career researchers in the field of the Humanities, wishing to reflect on the current state of the Humanities in Europe and beyond, to identify the main concerns and priorities of researchers in the field, and to put forward a set of policy proposals aiming at the flourishing not only of the Humanities but of all scientific research in Europe:

Commending the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO), the International Council for Philosophy and Human Sciences (CIPSH) and the Foundation for Science and Technology (FCT) for their joint organization of the Conference in articulation with the Portuguese Presidency of the Council of the European Union, and for including the perspective of young researchers through the promotion of the Youth Forum;

Thanking the European National Funding Agencies for their help in selecting researchers to participate in the Youth Forum, FCT and Instituto Politécnico de Tomar (IPT) for their help in setting up the Forum, and also all the researchers who responded to the call for expressions of interest to join the Forum;

Taking into account the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development, adopted by all United Nations Member States, and notably its 4th goal, of ensuring inclusive and equitable quality education and promoting lifelong learning opportunities for all;

Considering the European Union's goals of research and innovation policy, and namely those defined in *A Vision for Europe*, of promoting principles of open innovation, open science and openness to the world;



Recalling the European Parliament's 2010 Resolution on “Better Careers and more mobility: a European Partnership for researchers” that calls for the establishment of a single EU career model in the field of research;

Recognizing the inspiration drawn from the constitution of UNESCO, CIPSH and previous recommendations following events jointly organized by these institutions, including those gathered in the Outcome Document of the World Humanities Conference (held in Liège, Belgium, 6-11 August 2017), and namely of “securing the academic independence of researchers”, fostering interdisciplinary research and improving “the participation of young scholars in all humanities research activities”;

Having gathered more than 60 young or early-career researchers from all across Europe and who engaged in discussions and deliberations concerning the future of the Humanities for a period of 5 months, culminating in the Youth Forum in May 2021:

1) Put forward an **assessment** of the current state of the Humanities, **identifying** the following **challenges** and **perspectives** for the future:

1.1 Influence and Impact of the Humanities in Society

It is generally agreed that the Humanities should be valued in their diversity irrespective of any distinction between “fundamental” and “applied” research or any for-profit motivation, for two reasons. First, because the specificity of the knowledge developed in the Humanities is unique and valuable in itself; second, because one never knows what future applications there might be for any given research.

However, it is also acknowledged that some of the main reasons for the so-called crisis of the Humanities is a lack of understanding, on the part of the general public, of the work done in the Humanities and the value it brings with it. This phenomenon is correlated with a lack of visibility of the Humanities in societies at large, as well as for public and private stakeholders. Many researchers argue that the external perception of the formative and social role of the Humanities is one of invisibility, on the one hand, and uselessness, on the other (when not one of spite and social inconsideration). Researchers are extremely keen to point out that such flaws in impact and social (mis)perception are due to a globalized trend to struggle for profit and short-term benefit in all sorts of human endeavor – and the consequences of such generalized mindset are widely absorbed (even stimulated) by schools, universities and governments.

As such, the assessment is that the current overall impact of the Humanities on society is rather minor. This seems to be due to the intangible character of most of its outputs, but the impact varies from discipline to discipline. Researchers tend to agree,



though, that the impact of the Humanities should be greater and warn that ignoring them can have critical consequences. For instance, given that the Humanities strive to understand human beings, both individually and collectively, they can have a role in the understanding of conflicts and societal problems around the world.

Furthermore, the Humanities foster critical thinking and empathy, through a sort of non-instrumental rationality that is not usually developed in the STEM disciplines. Without exercising such skills, people are more prone to accept marginalizing narratives without questioning them. Hence, failing to acknowledge the true value of the Humanities helps perpetuate marginalization and systematic oppression. The Humanities must, therefore, strive to become more popular, also in order to help tackle these problems and make visible the meaningful contributions the field makes to society. In order to change the current state of affairs, the field must face the shared assumption that whatever is not profitable is not relevant. It is part of the role of the Humanities to question central aspects of life, such as the role of work and what it is *to be* in a society dominated by technology. The Humanities, then, must find ways of affirming their worth.

1.2 Challenges faced by Researchers in the Humanities

Concerning the status of researchers and scholars in the Humanities and the difficulties and concerns they face, the following main challenges present themselves:

1.2.1 Access to Funding, Career Stability and Evaluation

Some of the main challenges in contemporary academia revolve around funding and while this affects all researchers, it can disproportionately affect these areas of research, such as the Humanities, which are not deemed a priority for many funding bodies. These challenges boil down to three intimately interrelated topics: (i) lack of funding, (ii) lack of stability and (iii) inadequate evaluation.

With regard to lack of funding, researchers state that low wages are affecting the quality of research. The lack of attractive jobs leads people to abandon research activities or emigrate. This, in turn, creates a vicious circle: as talented people abandon research or emigrate, the quality of academic output decreases, which leads to less funding; with less funding, there are less incentives to pursue academic careers in the Humanities, which then further pushes talented people to opt for other careers or emigrate. Lack of funding is also determining the topics of research, which are chosen in accordance not with their interest, but with what is trending.



At the same time, lack of funding means scarcity in research positions, which contributes to the lack of stability faced by young researchers in the Humanities. Lack of career stability deeply affects the work-life balance of young researchers (and, consequently, their personal and family lives). Mobility is highly valued among researchers but cannot be maintained through decades as it can become a burden, and it might hinder the raising of a family. The fact that no maternity leave is provided by most institutions makes this issue especially stringent on women, thus reinforcing gender inequality.

Research itself is affected by the lack of stability. Having to work on their applications for funding, researchers have less time to focus on what is essential for their research. This creates (yet another) vicious circle: less time to focus on what is essential means less publications, which makes it more difficult to find a position and hence increases the pressure to apply for funding. A deliberate choice of a career in the Humanities, well into the twentieth-first century, is a risk.

And in times of deep economic recession, evidence of a deliberate public decision to disinvest in the field comes to the fore. And that is, *per se*, a trigger for public debate. And while it is hard to believe that a global trend, which has now more than thirty years, will be reversed when the whole world is facing an unprecedented and still poorly grasped economic downturn like the Covid-19 crash, yet there are reasons to defend that it is worthwhile to wager on the Humanities to help face the difficult challenges we must meet.

Project-based research is also a concern, as it might undermine the independence of researchers, who become focused on pleasing the funders. Some researchers highlight the positive aspects of short-term commitments at an early stage of one's career. They agree, however, that a better balance between tenured and non-tenured positions is desirable.

Furthermore, the extreme competitiveness of research careers is accompanied by an evaluation of curricula based on *quantity*, rather than on the effective *quality*, of production. Quality, in turn, is often reduced to rankings, rather than to the content of the publications. The criteria to determine the quality and desired frequency of publications was borrowed from those employed in other areas of research, leading to an inadequate evaluation of young researchers' work.

The favoring of papers over books when evaluating curricula is seen as an incentive for researchers not to look for and reflect upon bigger considerations (the "big picture"), which are fundamental in the Humanities.

Also, the role of the Humanities in local communities is currently undervalued. Local publications and contact with local communities are not considered when evaluating curricula, in particular publications in languages other than English. This is



less than ideal, as all the parties – the communities, the researchers and the Humanities as a whole – could benefit from a more in-depth local embedding – and reception – of the research undertaken.

Some researchers state that the challenges above stem from the neoliberalization of academia. Researchers on the Humanities are expected to produce outputs, rather than becoming true thinkers and pedagogues, and this is a major challenge to the independence of researchers and their capacity to pursue their own research interests and bolster their creativity in an unrestricted and meaningful way.

1.2.2 Other Challenges: Decolonizing the Curricula, Protecting Researchers' Well-being, Reaching the Young Generations and Connecting to Business

In addition to the major challenges pinpointed in 1.2.1 and which are due to the way in which contemporary academia and funding schemes are devised, there is a set of other important challenges, ranging from the way in which teaching curricula are built to the balance and well-being of researchers in the difficult and unforeseen circumstances caused by the Covid-19 pandemic, not forgetting the challenges of reaching out to younger generations and, for those who wish to do so, connecting research to alternative career paths in business.

Concerning curricula, there is a challenge arising from the tension between the way in which the canon and teaching practices have been built in the past, and the reality of plurality and diversity that has been often left out of the curricula. Researchers stress that the Humanities need to encompass the diversity of traditions and cherish plurality, embracing the contributions of other knowledge systems (indigenous, traditional, non-western, non-expert, etc.), in a braided-knowledge approach that explores the various ways in which research and problem-solving can be addressed. The construction of inclusive curricula in the Humanities is crucial for this approach, requiring the analysis of who is excluded from the curricula and why, since they have traditionally been, and still are, dominated by a canon of dominant authors who are, more often than not, white, male, and Western. Comparative approaches should be used to make curricula more inclusive and livelier, establishing a dialogue between these dominant authors and marginalized currents of thought and/or creative production coming from different backgrounds, such as diversity in terms of race, gender, ethnicity, religion, class, sexuality, able-bodiedness and so forth. If it is true that the Humanities are tightly linked to the multiple shades of our being-in-the-world with others, then it is crucial to tackle the issues of underrepresentation, explicit and implicit biases, and exclusion within the curricula as well.



A different challenge currently affecting scholars from all fields is the burden brought by the Covid-19 pandemic, with the transition to on-line work, the disruption of research plans and the anxiety brought about by a further menace to job stability as student enrollment drops and financing seems less than certain. Concerning this challenge, researchers in the Forum stressed the crucial importance of mental and physical well-being for the quality of their work and outputs. Given the current scenario in which pay is low and social acknowledgment is scarce, researchers claim that work-life balance must be kept at all costs, and relevant breaks must be made from the permanent need to be connected to the web and respect deadlines (a trend that was worsened by the pandemic).

Concerning the lack of social prestige of the Humanities, and the scarcity of student enrollment, researchers underline that there needs to be a change in mentality. And the responsibility for this lies both in scholars in the Humanities, who probably need to do a better job disseminating their work, but also, and fundamentally, in governments and funding bodies. One important feature of the debate underlining this need for a change in mentality comes from examining the dangerous downside, for younger and future generations, of not having taken the Humanities seriously in the last decades. Researchers feel that education in the Humanities is fundamental to foster skills of empathy and critical thinking and that its absence can create pervasive vulnerabilities in the young generations such as a possible lack of historical awareness or a difficulty to express their views in a profound and coherent fashion.

As for career paths, some researchers also state that the Humanities could benefit from a better integration with businesses. Evidence exists that many successful people in business are also cultivated and for instance have strong reading habits; but many young people nowadays restrict themselves to reading short pieces of text in social media. This is not tantamount to saying that research funding should be incentivized by profit; indeed, an overwhelming majority of researchers defend quite the opposite, as the focus on output, production and for-profit incentives usually appear as obstacles. However, more pathways for integration with industry and businesses can be of use to people who have a formation in the Humanities and perhaps also a history of research in the Humanities and who might want to apply these skills for business. If successful, this possibility could also open up new career paths and help attracting more students to formations in the Humanities, thus helping to keep them viable in the long run. Furthermore, there should be institutional mechanisms for acknowledging independent researchers and for fostering transferable skills needed for people transitioning from research to other fields.



1.3 Perspectives for the Future

Given the challenges identified above, researchers participating in the Youth Forum reflected on what perspectives might lie ahead for the Humanities. This assessment of what is desirable for the field puts us in the path for the more concrete proposals laid out in Section 2 of this report.

1.3.1. Securing the Autonomy of Researchers

Statements by participants in the Forum tend to consistently highlight the need for more autonomy to be given to the Humanities and their practitioners, especially for those working in academia, and stress the urge for a less profit-oriented design in public and private decision-making, as well as in research policies. Young researchers and professionals of the Humanities need to be allowed to choose the directions and methodologies of their work, free from decisions and strategies defined by the older generations and to which they had no opportunity to contribute. The definitions of ‘productivity’ and ‘contribution’ need to be open enough to allow young researchers the opportunity to define research areas and topics of their interest, with the methods of their choosing, even if they are not seen as immediate priorities by the funding agencies. Research agencies need to allow for ‘unplanned’ discoveries by also promoting basic research, in addition to the existing ‘key’ and ‘hot’ topics. As such, academics should be given more autonomy and more time – the current situation leads to fragmented and often superfluous and inconsequential research projects, where quantity is valued above quality. Therefore, we need to rethink the context and resources where research is made before pointing out specific issues as research priorities.

1.3.2 Research Priorities

Even though the autonomy defended above is seen as prerequisite for fostering creativity and should apply to individual research, participants in the Youth Forum are keenly aware that these priorities do exist and also mention some general orientations and topics that are felt as important. This applies both to core research in the Humanities, as well as to some of its novel applications, such as those that deal with the ‘Digital Turn’, and to a deeper interdisciplinary engagement with other fields. Some of these wider movements and processes could be summed up as opening the Humanities to the World.



1.3.2.1 Opening the Humanities to the World

As already mentioned, one of the main challenges has to do with recognizing and valuing the diversity of knowledge sources. Decolonizing the Humanities is thus assumed as a topic of top priority, to make them more inclusive and truly representative. This can also be done by engaging local communities and intercultural dialogue, in addition to the attention given to a plurality of different traditions.

Another research priority is to make research more applicable in wider societal issues, such as climate, Covid-19 and pandemics, migrations, social injustice, the digital age, and so forth. Participants in the Forum note that we have been using past basic research in new and extraordinary ways during the current pandemic, and that these new applications should be promoted. The Humanities need also to explore the intersections with current movements to where society is heading – including cognitive humanities, subverting the conventional Humanities/science divide, or participating in the discussions on the origin and significance of art, literature and culture, currently taking place in cognitive sciences.

The Humanities need to also address the future, namely the creation of more sustainable futures. The needs for transition, our experience with the Anthropocene and the current relation with nature, each other, and technology, should be addressed. For instance, the environmental Humanities explore areas where urgent issues of our times collide, promoting the dialogical process of thinking about and acting on the future, to think of more sustainable and ‘post-Anthropocene’ ways of being human, including the concept of ecology. The Humanities have the power to open up new perspectives on the world, to aid in opening and (re)defining the critical conceptual framework in a changing world, thus creating a commitment towards its transformation. Educating children and young generations is crucial in this process.

One of the ways in which these processes can be advanced is by further exploring the possibilities laid open by the ‘Digital Turn’, and which have been made more evident by the pandemic. Another one is by promoting in a more systematic manner interdisciplinary research and teaching, where the Humanities could have a very important role to play.

1.3.2.2 Humanities and the ‘Digital Turn’

Digital technology has led to a questioning of some of the core assumptions of Humanities scholarship, with the popularization of digital methods in the Humanities in the last decade or so. This leads to two main questions: (i) how we can better use digital



technologies in research in the Humanities, and (ii) what is the role of the Humanities in the digital age?

First, digital technology gives us tools and methods to engage, study, transform, criticize, and even play with our own research, and it is often today an inherent part of research. The digital Humanities are means to further develop this research, by asking new questions, in new ways, through new methodologies and new practices. Second, the world today is closely attached to the digital, and will continue to be so in the future. Humanities' soft skills are needed in the digital age and this will become apparent if research and practice establish a good dialogue with the digital world. Digital tools can also be used to educate and share knowledge about our common humanity, thus making the Humanities more attractive to the younger generations, in a way that traditional museums, for instance, often are not able to do.

At the same time, the digital turn also presents challenges and perils, and the Humanities are needed to help assess these challenges, which are similar to those presented by the trends towards quantification and objectification, and the Humanities can help to put forward an informed critique of the excesses of these tendencies. As such, the analysis of the digital and digitalization can offer new insights into our modern life, and thus the emergence of the digital age and the transformation of fundamental human processes should also be a top topic of research for the Humanities.

1.3.2.3 Further Promoting Meaningful Interdisciplinarity

Participants in the Forum feel that today the Humanities usually do not promote relevant interdisciplinary work, in spite of the world being a system where, ultimately, everything is interconnected. Thus, interdisciplinary approaches should occur naturally, even if organized in different ways according to each situation.

Many agree that the major difficulty lies not in the Humanities themselves but in the rigid monodisciplinary way in which the production of knowledge and its education through life is structured. The specialization of each individual often starts in high school (and earlier in some educational systems) by demanding to 14/15 years old students to choose one area to the detriment of all others, resulting in a society in which each person knows more and more about less and less, thus increasingly creating difficulties of communication between different types of expertise.

Many believe that the solution for this situation may be in the creation of innovative means through which people can widen up their knowledge instead of narrowing it down, for instance by rethinking the structure of the academic institutions in such a way that knowledge could be gathered in more flexible ways. Such change may be difficult, at



least in a near future, as many academics may not be open to imagine universities radically different. In fact, some believe that the movement towards such solution may face resistance and even result in significant cutbacks, while others report that interdisciplinary proposals are often hurt in their evaluation when submitted because evaluation panels tend to be conservative.

One possible way to experiment on this possibility is the development of interdisciplinary pilot-projects with small groups composed by people able to share their different methods and backgrounds to guarantee a broader scientific basis to their work, and then slowly build the institutional infrastructure needed to develop interdisciplinary projects. Because interdisciplinarity seems hard to achieve, such successful cases should be highlighted and disseminated in order to inspire others.

1.3.2.4 Rethinking Education in the Humanities from Schools to Academia

When discussing the future of the Humanities, research and education are two sides of the same coin as we cannot properly address the problems of one side without also taking into account the other.

Rethinking school practices is fundamental at every level, promoting research that is more involved, fosters the sharing of experiences, and crosses disciplinary boundaries. The goal should be that of forming thinkers, encouraging dissent rather than complacency, promoting the exploration of new and creative solutions, and providing critical (digital) literacy skills. It should not only be about providing answers, but instead about making questions and fostering dialogue.

As for higher education, and as hinted above, the tendency for exacerbated specialization needs to be countered by new attempts at interdisciplinarity and the curricula diversified. Positive examples include inter-faculty degrees, and the combination of courses from several departments, encouraging students to interact with different areas and contents.

Furthermore, the presence of educators with formation in the Humanities in education systems should be greater, so as to balance the greater presence of the STEM disciplines. The importance of STEM in academia seems to be long-lasting. Given that the Humanities foster a different kind of reasoning, they should perhaps focus on those areas where the STEM have little to say, while also providing meaningful input to topics dealt with by these disciplines, but with the tools in which the Humanities excel. For instance, the Humanities will not, by themselves, aim to solve problems such as climate change or a pandemic, but they can contribute with historical accounts, normative assessments, critical thinking and deliberation on political options, and the ability to put



forward arguments and synthesize discussions consistently, thus helping to find encompassing solutions. And the same goes for the assessment of crises and of economic phenomena. For instance, communicating work in History is of fundamental importance as it helps understanding and anticipating possible future changes.

2) Taking into account this assessment, put forward the following **recommendations**:

Participants in the Forum recognize that many of the abovementioned challenges are not specific to the Humanities, but they seem to be aggravated therein. As such, they put forward, in their reflections, a set of recommendations on policies that are certainly relevant for the Humanities, but not exclusively. Taken together, they serve as hints to reformulate the organization of several aspects of the institutional framework guiding research in Europe, because facing these issues requires systemic changes at an international level.

Several suggestions were made, ranging from allocating more funds to research in the Humanities, to remunerating peer-review, preparing students (in MA's and PhD programs) to successfully apply for funding so as to help them deal with the competitive job market, strengthening the safety nets provided to researchers (e.g. the agencies' policies concerning maternity leave, and more research on researchers' well-being) and evaluating work in the Humanities according to qualitative criteria including context-specific factors such as integration with local communities.

Based on these deliberations and suggestions, researchers in the Youth Forum issue a call addressed at relevant institutions and stakeholders in the field of education, research and innovation in Europe, as well as to all relevant political bodies at several levels and individuals engaged in research in the Humanities and in other areas.

Besides being a call for reflection this is also a call for action, for the crisis of the Humanities is also a sign of a world in crisis and, conversely, vibrant research – including in the Humanities – is, we believe, also a condition of possibility for answering to these crises with the best knowledge at our disposal. But this necessitates meaningful changes in the institutional framework guiding research and education in Europe and elsewhere, and which should take place as early as possible, hopefully still under the Horizon Europe timeline (2021-2027).

As such, we, young or early-career researchers in the Humanities:



1. Call on higher education institutions, research centres and similar scholarly bodies to:
 - Avoid the pitfalls of a model of narrow monodisciplinary specialization by fostering true inter- and transdisciplinary research and education;
 - Recognize the plurality of meaningful traditions in knowledge production and thus to further the efforts to diversify and decolonize the curricula.
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 - Commit to tackling the problem of career stability in research, studying new ways to establish proper research careers in the EU, including the creation of an institutional framework to implement the much-needed unified European research career and incentivize institutions to reduce the levels of precarity of early-career researchers, safe-guarding leaves (maternity, sick, unemployment, etc.);
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