# White Paper: The Value of Humanities

Project Team ›Advancing the Value of Humanities – in Academia, Society and Industry‹

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## Synopsis

This white paper is a result of the teaching and research project ›Advancing the Value of Humanities – in Academia, Society and Industry‹ promoted by Erasmus+ and carried out at the University of Liechtenstein, Karl-Franzens-University Graz and HafenCity University Hamburg (2018-2021). This paper problematises the current situation at universities regarding economisation and competition and the impact of increasing efficiency, bureaucratisation and formatting in teaching. These are complex factors that prevent the humanities in particular from developing their core qualities. Moreover, against the background of the COVID-19 pandemic and pressing social issues, the potential and urgency of the humanities are becoming clear.

**Economisation and formatting at universities**

The economisation of universities manifests itself in various aspects: by favouring training and employability, comprehensive education and the promotion of critical thinking are being pushed into the background. Complex bureaucratic processes brought on by increasing bureaucratisation impede widely called-for innovative teaching. In addition, academics in humanities and cultural studies see themselves exposed to permanent and increasing pressure to prove their legitimacy. The effects of this result in the disappearance of humanities from university and public discourse.

**Project results – the savoir-faire of the humanities**

This white paper outlines the domain of the humanities with reference to the corresponding modes of thinking, contexts and significances. It also highlights some methodological approaches and positions that are particularly important today, such as empathy and empowerment. Using a range of operational terms such as openness, collectivity, complexity and unlearning, which could be checked and updated in the context of three specific teaching-research projects, the value of humanities is made tangible and applicable. In addition, a toolbox with selected methods that was successfully used in the three teaching projects will be presented and is available on the project website www.valhuman.com.

**Proposals for action**

In conclusion, a three-stage model of action is proposed, which legitimises strengthening the humanities at universities and beyond and promoting social dialogue: Thinking together - Speaking together - Acting together!

# Why a white paper?

*»Il n'y a pas lieu de craindre ou d'espérer, mais de chercher de nouvelles armes.«*
*»There is no reason to fear or hope, only to look for new weapons.«*
*(Gilles Deleuze, 1990)*

As part of the teaching and research project ›Advancing the Value of Humanities – in Academia, Society and Industry‹, some important findings on the difficult situation of humanities in the context of German-speaking universities were compiled and brought to a point. The humanities are exposed to structural shifts in values at the universities and are therefore not reaching their full potential when it comes to their social output. We use various media and formats to emphatically stress the deficiencies of this situation and the potential that is being lost.

A white paper turns a specific problem into the starting point for a proposal for action and thus calls for a change of course. We choose this format in order to emphatically accentuate this known problem and to make it public again – which also includes making this public to those not involved in the academic world. It takes the trenchant documentation of the teaching-research projects found on the www.valhuman.com website as its starting point and supports it with recommendations for action. The document goes beyond a critique of the current situation, encouraging a strengthening of the role of humanities in the context of a "landscape of knowledge" both at universities and beyond, characterised by curiosity and creativity, mutual understanding and social responsibility. The aim is to share this consolidated version, to discuss it and to make it effective in society.

## I The problem: economisation and formatting at universities

Today, the usefulness of academic institutions and their academic output are increasingly assessed like commercially managed enterprises. Accordingly, academic achievements must, above all, be quantifiable and thus made transparent and measurable for the public. Content that is less tangible in terms of its social effects, for example having a slower effect over time, is less accepted. From this economic perspective, a practical interest in knowledge appears more obvious than a theoretical one, short-term scientific planning along current lines of funding more effective than long-term pure research. Against this background, the humanities do not seem to be particularly worthwhile. Their accomplishments are not compatible with the principles of measurability and comparability that have shaped the university landscape since the 1990s (Power 1994, Färber et al. 2015, Stengers 2018). The social significance of the humanities is becoming less and less important.

Vocational training versus education or employability versus critical thinking Universities today are "places of training and employability" (Bürk 2016: 235) that promise the acquisition of skills as a kind of currency for the job market. Students are reduced to their role as recipients of ECTS credits who have a contractual relationship based on the exchange of services with their university. The relationship between lecturers and students is becoming increasingly economised. The wish in this context of both lecturers and learners to try out skills that are to be developed over the long term for the critical and constructive shaping of society

seems almost inflated and out of place. Effectiveness in the form of limitation becomes the decisive quality. But without options for deepening one's learning, extending it over time or investing in measures that build trust, it is difficult to impart ways of thinking in terms of relationships and contexts. Students thus risk finishing their studies without ever experiencing core qualities of their studies or being able to pass these on in their work and in society (see for example van Ess 2016).

## Bureaucratisation as a henchman of economisation

Innovative teaching and research are demanded by all, yet are impeded at the same time by complex bureaucratic processes. Numerous studies show that the effort for academic self-administration has increased due to the Bologna reform at universities and has led to more bureaucracy, while teaching has become more inflexible (see among others, Petersen 2017). Flexibility and a willingness to experiment, such as trying out new teaching formats, cooperating with other institutions within and outside the university or adapting teaching content to current and contemporary events as well as politicisation are essential for high-quality teaching in the humanities and cultural studies. However, the pre-formatting and increased effectiveness, for example by repeating the same teaching content/formats leave little room for this. Short contracts and precarious working conditions for non-professional university teaching staff, who often take on teaching tasks, also contribute to the fact that a special commitment to teaching is less appealing (see Federal Report on Young Scientists 2017 – "Bundesbericht Wissenschaftlicher Nachwuchs 2017")

## Disappearing down gaps in the discourse?

For a long time, the humanities had been accused of being backward-looking and hostile to modernisation. This was also used to justify the accusation that the humanities did not actively participate in shaping the world for the future (Assmann 2003: 12f). Although many-faceted processes for dealing with the past such as the post-colonial revision of knowledge and modernisation processes such as the hybridisation of cultural studies programs have taken place, humanities and cultural scholars are still exposed to permanent and increasing pressure to transform as well as prove their legitimacy. Humanities and cultural studies institutes also have to accept a growing loss of importance (Litscher 2016). When it comes to dealing with current social problems and challenges, cultural and humanities scholars are rarely addressed, even though cultural-studies approaches and arguments are very popular in a wide variety of scientific disciplines and application contexts (Koschorke 2007, Bachmann-Medick 2011). The problem here is not the broad adoption of such approaches, but the lack of visibility and diminishing awareness of the production of knowledge of cultural studies.

## II General conditions
The savoir-faire of the humanities: what ways of thinking are conveyed in the humanities? Given the difficult current situation, what skills should receive particular attention?

In the humanities, theoretical knowledge is developed, the quality of which lies in a fundamental openness to interpretation which thus apparently runs counter to the idea of what is objectively measurable. A heightening of this knowledge is achieved, however, to a greater degree through (self-)reflection and dialogue (Litscher 2016). The area of responsibility of the humanities is in conveying contexts and certain ways of thinking, which are expressed in diverse skills such as:

_ Openness
_ Empathy
_ Critically constructive and creative thinking
_ Personal responsibility
_ Contextual setting
_ Ability to collaborate
_ Thinking in relationships
_ Questioning hierarchies and promoting empowerment
_ Dealing with (inter-)cultural settings
_ Practising interdisciplinary and transdisciplinary approaches
_ Orientation towards democratic and cultural values
_ Debates based on cultural history
_ Continuing to build a (historically informed) open society

The project "Advancing the Value of Humanities – in Academia, Society and Industry" aimed to apply this catalogue of skills in specific contexts on the basis of case studies and to monitor the catalogue for any necessary updates. In view of the problems outlined above, today's humanities are about promoting these ways of thinking and skills, communicating them in research and teaching as well as in society. The humanities are also concerned with visibly situating and discussing relevant knowledge or knowledge production – also with regard to ensuring topicality. In the current Covid-19 crisis we would like to emphasise the importance of empathy and empowerment, which have also proven to be particularly central in the teaching-research project.

Empathy can be roughly "defined as the capability to visualise other people's emotional situations in order to understand these – the emotions, the situations, the people" (Schmetkamp 2019:12). Empathy is the willingness and ability on which participation and co-determination in modern democracy is based. It is a key factor in a functioning community in which different perspectives are heard and recognised. At the same time, empathy must be allowed in the awareness that it can unleash forces that can lead to unintended side-effects such as control, manipulation or inequality (Breithaupt 2017). Living and learning from fundamental liberal values requires space, methods and processes that are geared towards reflection and dialogue. Outdated hierarchical structures must be broken up!

Empowerment as a concept and action is closely linked to political and social positions or demands such as those of the feminist, anti-colonial and post-colonial as well as anti-racist movements. Empowerment is "not simply imparting general action and organisational competencies, but is much more preparation for successful conflict resolution from a specific social position." (Araba, Johnston, Görg: aforementioned.)5 In the context of critical educational work as part of a project of critical humanities, empowerment can be understood as being both a process and a goal. In this respect, empathy and empowerment are closely related to one another, especially in educational processes. Only a form of relationship based on empathy, openness and dialogue can processes of empowerment be enabled (cf. Freire 1973).

## III Results from the teaching-research projects

>>*The classroom remains the most radical space of possibility in the academy.*<<
(Bell, Hooks, 1994)

Based on the findings of the teaching-research projects that took place as part of the project ›Advancing the Value of Humanities – in Academia, Society and Industry‹[1], structural aspects and operative terms were worked out and a methodical toolbox was created. These are the specific results of the reflection on teaching research and, within the scope of the white paper, present a range of terms that aim to make the value of humanities tangible and applicable.

[1] More details about the three seminars that were designed, realised and evaluated as part of the research project can also be found at www.valhuman.com.

# A. Operative terms/keywords

Central operative terms that transpired to "set the rhythm" in the teaching-research projects were: openness, space, collective, complexity, unlearning and time. They are coordinates for the creation of teaching-learning settings in which the value of humanities is conveyed not only discursively, but also in the socio-spatial design of the situation.

### _Openness
Openness as a learning disposition can be acquired through practice. It makes an integral contribution to the experience of that which is not-yet-known. Didactically supported openness nourishes curiosity. It is a prerequisite for independent thinking and scrutiny, and is a prerequisite for a democratic collective.

### _Space
The concept of space is central to the analysis of social relationships: a concept of space, understood in its triad of physical, (socially) experienced and discursive dimensions, enables the advancement of a complex understanding of society.

### _Collective
The creation of a community of reciprocal teachers and learners is the basis for interdisciplinary team teaching on equal footing with students. It is fundamentally conflictual, process-based and a prerequisite for independent positioning in the face of social issues.

### _Complexity
Understanding complex relationships and thinking in constellations prevents ideologically shaped cause-and-effect thinking. Complexity-oriented research and thinking makes it possible to understand social realities in their multiple facets and conditionalities.

_Unlearning
The concept of unlearning questions, learning processes and education in their entanglement with power and domination. For this purpose, you leave behind your own comfort zones and familiar and accustomed perspectives. Irritation and friction can be used as didactic instruments for unlearning processes with regard to university teaching-learning situations

_Time
Learning processes require longer periods. The factor of time plays a fundamental role in the acquisition, processing and discussion of knowledge and insights. Contemplation, reflection, understanding and implementing what has been learnt as a path of knowledge along with practical experience are central parameters of academic training.

# B. Tools and methods

Firmly established tools of the humanities are, for example, ›cultural analysis‹, which seeks to represent and understand cultural phenomena in their complexity, or ›self-reflection‹ as a permanent accompanist in the research process, as well as methodical approaches at the interface to artistic strategies, such as ›irritation‹ which starts with ambivalences, breaks up comfort zones and initiates reflection processes. Furthermore, new, sensory-oriented and situationally developed methods could be applied and checked in the teaching-research projects, such as the ›Epistemic Thing‹, which makes the individual level of experience connectable to the social function of everyday objects, or the ›SELT – Solidaric-Eye-Level-Translation‹ method which we developed as part of cultural and interdisciplinary multilingualism.

The entire toolbox, with selected methods that were successfully used in the three teaching-research projects is available online on the project website www.valhuman.com and has been prepared with short descriptions including information about experiences with the toolbox and its application for teachers and learners.

# IV Proposals for action

*»[...] the place of an unconditional and presuppositionless debate of all these problems, the legal space for their elaboration and reworking, must (sic!) in principle be kept open in the university and par excellence in the humanities. Not to wall them up there, but on the contrary to open up the best possible access to a new public space that is being transformed by new techniques of communication, information, recording and generation of knowledge.«*
(Jacques Derrida, 2001)

Against the background of the situation explained under points I to III, we would like to make concrete proposals for action based on the project experience and in the current context of the COVID-19 pandemic, which make another university imaginable and feasible.

If we look at the fields of action of the humanities, they encompass a wide variety of formats, ranging from philosophical discourse (e.g. keynote speeches) to work in NGOs (areas of practice). It is precisely in this 'in between' that it is essential to transfer knowledge to other fields and media. This requires skills and characteristics that are learned, practiced and implemented in the course of study and in the application of humanities – such as empathy, self-confidence, self-reflexivity and the power of relativisation, etc.

Studies and the university today are mechanistically, bureaucratically and technocratically organised and far too seldom lead to interpersonal rapprochement and negotiation. It is precisely here that we see the starting point for a different, new form of university, based on empathic knowledge relationships between students and lecturers and between lecturers and students among themselves. We propose to think in terms of the feminist concept of care and apply it in relation to intellectual and humanities education. Formulating empathy in particular as a response to the economisation of training and learning relationships involves developing mutually-supportive behaviour and understanding social relationships as a central component of political action. And if we understand empathy as the answer and "weapon" (cf. Deleuze 1990) of the humanities, we need collaboration and interdisciplinarity to better visualise the capabilities of the humanities. With three suggested actions for formats of networking (thinking together), the creation of small, intensive and committed public spheres (speaking together) and collaborative situations of becoming visible (acting together), we would like to demonstrate why it is worthwhile exploring the potential of humanities in particular to consciously use times of crisis like these for a constructive change in the university teaching-learning landscape and what it specifically takes to be able to think, speak and act together.

## Proposals for action 1:
## THINKING TOGETHER – Meeting each other through thought

*»Thinking is a materialist practice. It is not some kind of into the sky, theories from above, but rich materialist inquiring with each other, who and where we are, and so what, the old what is to be done, the question that leads to the Russian Revolution. What is to be done in periods of profound historical and earthly transformation, that are extremely dangerous. I think thinking together, reading and writing and speaking and performing and dancing and growing and risking and working; thinking is a complex materialist practice for some-how coming together to be less stupid!«* (Donna Haraway, 2020)

_ Creating social situations – analogue and digital
_ Being innovative in the forms of coming together which are (more) non-hierarchical
_ Acting in a unifying manner, also in a temporal sense: seminar structures that also go beyond a semester format, e.g. as compact, 2-3-week courses
_ Connecting with current social discussions and being critical
_ Also connecting in a spatial and social sense: having an impact beyond the university into the urban space, in the context of neighbour-hoods, in the surrounding area and in a transnational context
_ Connecting in an interdisciplinary sense, on different levels: establish-ing interdisciplinary cooperation in the university and between univer-sities (e.g. interdisciplinary teaching projects with students from different faculties between humanities, archi-tecture, technology and business)

We see networking activities as essential, on the one hand, when it comes to building alliances within the academic world and building bridges between the humanities and other disciplines and, on the other hand, building bridges reaching out from the university to other social areas (cul-tural, civil society, urban development, non-university adult education, school and extracurricular youth work). In both cases, networking requires a common way of thinking which includes conveying and translating the skills of the human-ities into other contexts as well as finding a common lan-guage. This common language undoubtedly lies in the con-nection of current social discussion and criticism towards a common knowledge of action.

Right now, in the context of the collective uncertainty caused by the COVID-19 pandemic, the importance of creat-ing social networking situations (analogue and digital) and communication as well as criticism calling for an empathetic, supportive and democratic society is becoming even clearer.

# Proposals for action 2:
## SPEAKING TOGETHER – Small public spheres facilitate exchange

*»[...] the idea of an egalitarian, multi-cultural society only makes sense if we suppose a plurality of public arenas in which groups with diverse values and rhetorics participate. By definition, such a society must contain a multiplicity of publics.«* (Nancy Fraser, 2007)

_ Initiating, trying out and (being allowed to) install innovative formats
_ Also being present in non-university, neuralgic/dialogue-oriented spaces
_ Being collaborative
_ Initiating dialogue, letting people speak
_ Asking important (follow-up) questions
_ Moderated roundtable discussions: talking to each other in an intensive, well-founded and committed way
_ Team-teaching

The one large, egalitarian public sphere does not exist (any longer); instead, the multiplicity of many small (partial) public spheres is required, which must be brought into a committed dialogue, where they are interested in each other (Fraser 1999). It is important to critically question the mechanisms inherent in public space for the displacement of marginalised groups, as well as to understand public space as a resource for self-assertion and becoming visible and to help shape this in the sense of the humanities.

To this end, we would like to propose the creation of small, participatory public spheres (both at and beyond the university), for example in the format of moderated roundtable discussions. These small public spheres are not to be misconstrued as exclusions. On the contrary, they have a connecting and anti-hierarchical effect through the curatorial aspect. A "culture of errors" should also be allowed, enabling common progress in order to be able to solve current challenges together.

Moderation has a central function in such initiated discussion groups, and must be willing to deal with conflict, courageously and responsibly makes its contribution through discourse to skip knowledge that has been gathered together. The aim is to create an atmosphere of listening to one another as a confidence-building basis to enable free thinking and speaking. This can be supported by a special setting, a spatial situation that lets us speak differently. As in an experimental setup, different settings can be tried out, reflected on and modified. In order to create small public spheres, we use the metaphor of the cell for spaces in which free thinking is practiced in a protected setting, in which the freedom of the sciences and the arts is celebrated. These spaces are characterised by a spirit of renewal. New, creative ideas are allowed to arise and subsequently be disseminated.

# Proposals for action 3:
## ACTING TOGETHER – Collaborating and becoming visible

*»Le devenir est le processus du désir.«/»Becoming is the process of desire.«*
(Félix Guattari/Gilles Deleuze, 1980)

*»Other people are required in order to act, so it is essentially political activity.«* (Gesine Schwan, 2006)

_ Create cells
_ New and different (non-)voluntary set-ups
_ Look for and promote non-university cooperation
_ Involve, address, and create non-university public spheres
_ Establish collectivity against neo-liberal isolation by recognising common interests and developing collaborative strategies for action
_ Address the casualisation of cultural scientists as part of the neoliberal restructuring of education-al institutions and the understanding of education
_ Form alliances with the cultural sector, the social sector and urban development
_ Think of the university as a network of different places of education (in a city), not as a hermetic institution for the reproduction of elites (Bourdieu)
_ Build social relationships based on solidarity
_ Be in the process of becoming and making utopian horizons visible – devenir (to become)

We see collaborative action as the basis for acting in soli-darity. Contrary to these neoliberal tendencies of isolation, it is important to think of the creation of collectivity as a place of discourse, criticism and self-empowerment as a guide for action. Only when common interests – both within the aca-demic field (between students and lecturers, lecturers and lecturers, etc.) and with groups and fields of activity beyond the university (such as urban planning, citizens' initiatives, the arts, museums, NGOs, etc.) – are formulated in relation to questions of society as a whole, can new forms of visibility and agency be created.

In the context of the shielding and isolation tendencies caused by the COVID-19 pandemic due to an increasing fear of social contacts, it seems to us all the more important to strengthen the power of interpersonal encounters, interac-tion with others and with strangers, as well as collaborative and solidary action – despite or precisely because of the given circumstances, to place this at the centre of consider-ations about what constitutes a good life, both during and beyond the pandemic.

# What's next?
## Strengthening the humanities – in order to act in a considered way together!

*»In this neoliberal moment, when relations between the state and civil society are central to the project of state legitimization, it is particularly important to formulate an inclusive definition of the informal arena of politics. Such a realistic understanding should account for the fluidity of grass-roots collective action across both the invited and the invented spaces of citizenship and acknowledge, as well, the significance of the invented spaces of insurgency and resistance.«* (Faranak Miraftab, 2004)

Humanities are indispensable for a society – let's make ourselves visible! Let's awaken the need for (more) humanities so that we can act together in a considered manner! Let's join forces in networks and think tanks of the critical humanities and get involved in political agendas on education!
The pedagogical field in particular is being asked to provide the tools and testing grounds that are needed for an active civil society. The university as an institution stands for a democratic and open society, but it does not (any longer) adequately fulfil this role: the front doors are there, but are they open? By repositioning and increasing the visibility of the humanities, the university is also being transformed to (again) become part of the public discourse and thus advocating a democratic and open society.

The Open Society (Karl Popper) is an achievement and an ideal of democracy. It requires individuals' participation and a feeling of responsibility for the common good and community. Especially in crisis situations – such as that of the COVID-19 pandemic and the global environmental crisis that is temporarily concealed behind it – it becomes clear that uncertainty is a fundamental constant in social coexistence. At the same time, insecurity is a condition that keeps society in a state of flux and thus remains open – in continuous negotiation of various interests, needs and desires. We cannot cede responsibility to the politicians for a feeling of supposed security. Instead it is more about accepting uncertainties and using one's own creative power to find new courses of action for a good life! It is a matter of taking on more responsibility for the democratic again and doing politics or to live the political in the sense of Hannah Arendt and to practice it again and again – in dialogue and in a controversial exchange of plural perspectives.

Our proposals for action relate to three levels – firstly, in teaching and didactic settings, secondly on the perception, role and impact of humanities at universities, and thirdly on the perception of humanities in the wider public: how can we integrate this attitude more strongly in teaching? And how can the importance and expertise of the humanities be perceived again (or more strongly) at universities and by the public at large?
The urgent and short-term demands address the universities and funding programmes to expand opportunities for teaching-learning experiments and research seminars and to be able to continue the research started by the ValHuman project (e.g. to enable more Erasmus pilot projects).
In the long term, structural changes must be involved, such as the implementation of these approaches in the university curricula, so that the humanities are not understood as an add-on, but as a democratic foundation and as a core curriculum. Universities should once again become places of more comprehensive and socially effective education and not wither away to become places of formatted education.

To ensure broader public perception, it is necessary to combine tactical and strategic action and to seize opportunities and expand these opportunities for alliances on a selective and long-term basis – in order to think, speak and act together and to demonstrate the political dimension of the humanities, their capabilities and their value for a democratic society in plural action and to anchor this in multiple places.

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