

# Decline of Humanities

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## Abstract

The fate of humanities has become a hot topic amongst savants and media recently. Current debates in the humanities are marked by words like 'decline', 'crises', 'threat', 'strain' etc. Experts and academicians/scholars in the field are in fact making onerous efforts to salvage the due honor of the humanities. Though there seems to be less disagreement on the descent of the discipline, it is imperative to understand in what sense this 'fall' is seen. More precisely what exactly is meant by 'decline of humanities'? While some refer to the decline of undergraduate enrollment, growing political criticism and diminution of the funding for humanities research as evidence of 'decline of humanities'; there are others who understand the phenomena in terms of moderating quality of faculty and research/knowledge produced. Some go even deeper and trace the decline at the epistemological roots of the discipline itself given the movement from department based disciplines to new

transdisciplinary formations. More generally it is the prestige, legitimacy or the credibility of the discipline that is being attacked or questioned. In this background the paper is an attempt to epitomize and reflect upon these variety of narratives offered to explain the challenging situation faced by humanities.

Lesser and lesser students are graduating from humanities across the globe. Reports based on federal data suggests that nationally US experienced a fall in humanities graduates from 14% in 1966 to just 7% in 2010. Another report from Harvard shows that from 1954 to 2012 the percentage of Humanities concentrators fell from 24 to 17 (without counting History as one of the Humanities); if History is counted, the fall is steeper, from 36 to 20. With one-third lesser potential freshman showing interest in the field (falling from 27% to 18% between 2006 and 2016), the situation can be expected to become further grim. In Yale, the English literature graduates fell from 165 in 1991 to 62 by 2012. In 1991, the top two majors at Yale were history and English. In 2013, they were economics and political science. At Pomona this year, they were economics



and mathematics. According to Prof. Homi K. Bhabha, director of the Mahindra Humanities Center at Harvard University, “the humanities are facing serious challenges in both developed and developing countries...In India for example the humanities are more or less dead, and professional schools and the study of business and technology are in the ascendant”. In the global marketplace of higher education, the humanities are increasingly threatened by decreased funding and political attacks. While the US government described humanities, social sciences and liberal arts as ‘non-strategic’, the Australian government referred to research in humanities as ‘increasingly ridiculous’. The Australian prime minister, promised to “reprioritize” 103 million Australian dollars, or \$93.6 million, from research in the humanities into medical research. Financing for humanities research in the United States has fallen steadily since 2009, and in 2011 was less than half of one percent of the amount dedicated to science and engineering research and development. In Britain the government funding for humanities teaching at undergraduate level has been pulled. According to a report in Research Trends magazine international arts and humanities funding has been in constant decline since 2009. The plummeting enrolments and eroding funding are leading to closing down of departments. In September, for example, Edinboro University of Pennsylvania announced that it was closing its sparsely populated

degree programs in German, philosophy, and world languages and culture. At elite universities, such departments are safe but wary. Evidences such as these suggest that humanities are indeed in crisis. Though some data crunchers and experts assert that the ‘crisis’ is overstated and allege that opponents of spending on humanities studies “use that fictitious decline to further delegitimize humanities research”. Broadly, there may be some lack of consensus on the extent of decline in enrollment and funding in humanities but there is certainly little doubt about the fading of interest in humanities among both students/parents and State; and sadly the trend is echoed globally.

The troubled situation of humanities can be explained in the light of transforming role of universities amidst the pressures of global economic and political forces. Traditionally universities shouldered the task of nation building and humanities, on its part, played a crucial role in creation of the culture. However today, retreating from their traditional function of nation-building for State, the contemporary Universities operate like bureaucratic corporation driven by the idea of ‘excellence’. Priorities have shifted from nation building to ‘applied nationalism’. As such subjects/disciplines that directly boost growth and productivity of the nation are chosen over others by the legislators. In such a scenario, while on one hand the ‘usefulness’ and ‘relevance’ of humanities is deeply questioned; on the other, programs like STEM (Science,



Technology, Engineering, Mathematics) which have ready applicability and confer greater financial and practical pay offs prosper/blossom at the cost of humanities. Consequently humanities receive shrinking funds and growing political criticism. Many critics point out to the dangers of too narrow and exclusive focus on the economy at the expense of the other social functions of higher education such as cultivating values, teaching how to appreciate arts, inculcating critical thinking, building foundation for exploring and understanding the human experience. Higher education serves a variety of complex social needs and interests, and effectively seeking to reduce knowledge to applied science is not only bad for the humanities, but also bad for science, bad for business and, ultimately, bad for the entire social order of which the economy is only a single interactive dimension.

Furthermore there is a new and narrowing vocational emphasis in the way students and their parents think about what to study in college. Students are no longer a subject of the nation-state but rather pure economic agents and have highly instrumental and economist's view (may be efficiency) of the purposes of higher education. And this explains diversion of students from less employable humanities disciplines to the sciences and management courses that assure better employment chances and greater economic benefits. However such a conservative and narrow-minded view of education fails to recognize that the study of humanities

offers skills that will help them sort out values, conflicting issues and fundamental philosophical questions. The issues of quality of life and well-being that are at the heart of the sciences, social sciences, and business and technology are in fact raised by humanities in first place.

The external legitimation crisis is accompanied by internal legitimation struggle wherein skepticism has crept in with regard to the pedagogy of teaching and nature of knowledge produced in the humanities. Academicians assert that various corruptions that have taken root in the disciplines of the humanities are responsible for its state in the modern university. In conforming to the standards set by corporate university (in market oriented sense) the field too has ended up being steered by market norms. One of the dominant reasons for this is financial dependence of university, and hence the humanities department, on state and other sources which place them in a poor position to insist on their right to determine their own research priorities. Thus research projects today are majorly guided by the demands of funding agencies. The academic freedom is also increasingly threatened by the alliance between public and private sector and imposition of state control. In the name of maintaining standards, teachers in university departments are subjected to mechanical standards of productivity that are much resented. With more administrative works rises the expense of administration, pushing up the costs that

students and their families pay without enhancing the academic side of their experience. On the other side, the idea of maintaining efficiency in university forces larger strength of class and thereby affects the quality of teaching adversely. With the advent of technology, online teaching has also become a feasibility. But how the lack of personal contact with the professor can impact the quality of teaching in a field like humanities is not hard to imagine. The emphasis of specialization brings along with it a technical narrowness in the curriculum. That narrowness sometimes reflects the tight focus of a professor's research, but it can also reflect a persistent doubt about the humanistic enterprise. It often leaves undergraduates wondering, just what they've been studying and why. Humanities seem to be failing in guiding students in exploring the meaning, value and purpose of life. Vast numbers of students come to university with no particular interest in their courses and no sense of how these might prepare them for future careers. Student's engagement with the studies, in terms of time devoted, has fallen over the years. For most of them, in the end, what the university offers is not skills or knowledge but credentials: a diploma that signals employability and basic work discipline.

Given such a turnaround of traditions and practices in the field, can we say that it is in crisis? Perhaps not, not until students and their parents continue to seek and pay for places at colleges and universities, and government and graduate schools continue

to accept their products, and corporations continue to hire them. Here one might contend that this condition seems to be weakening for humanities, can then we affirm the 'decline of humanities'. Well, there is certainly a decline of the traditional humanities, humanities as it was learned and taught earlier. However we need to understand that as the role of university is evolving in response to the needs of the society, so would and so should the role of humanities and other fields. Such a shuffling of roles would not lead to complete extinction of humanistic studies from the university, given the indispensability of humanities in preservation of values and creation of culture. Rather what this rearrangement of roles can lead to is a reconstruction of humanistic education.

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