



Humanities and Moral Ecology. The Need for a Specific Valuation of Humanities Knowledge in Universities to Recognize the Importance of Character Formation

Miguel Osorio García de Oteyza

Alberto López Rosado

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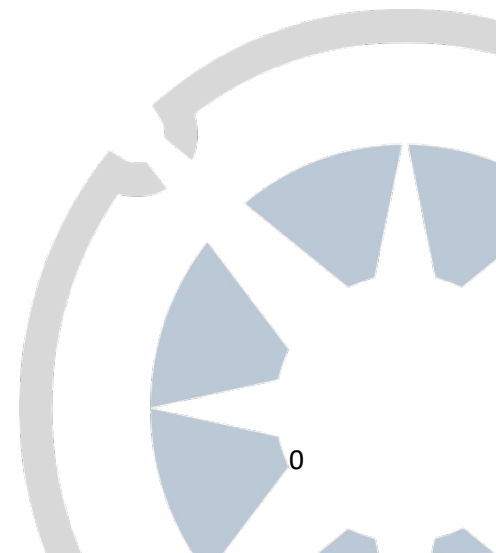
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Jubilee Centre for Character and Virtues

University of Birmingham, Edgbaston, Birmingham, B15 2TT United Kingdom

T: +44 (0) 121 414 3602 F: +44 (0) 121 414 4875

E: jubileecentre@contacts.bham.ac.uk W: www.jubileecentre.ac.uk



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Miguel Osorio García de Oteyza and Alberto López Rosado. Francisco de Vitoria University (Madrid, Spain).

Abstract

An innovative measurement of the social impact of the humanities from universities can help enhance the contribution of humanities professors and the universities themselves to society. Professors of virtue ethics, moral psychology, and character education have been playing a significant role in training students in moral ecology, which is particularly relevant in the 21st century. It is essential for future generations to have solid foundations to face the challenges and social crises of our turbulent era. We will propose some basic elements for creating a system of recognition and valuation of the humanities, starting with an explanation of the current context.

Introduction

Following Brooks, moral ecology is the set of internal dispositions that shape how we think, feel, and act in different circumstances (Brooks, 2021).

Education in virtues and human values plays a central role in the construction of character, which is the backbone of this moral ecology.

The Humanities and education in virtues are intertwined in such a way that one strengthens the other. While the Humanities provide tools to understand the ethical and social dilemmas faced by individuals and communities, education in virtues teaches how to act in accordance with those principles, promoting collective well-being and mutual respect (Vargas, 2010). The humanities and social sciences play a crucial role in promoting values, social cohesion, and addressing complex social issues. However, their social impact is not adequately measured or valued (Garfield, 2003). The intangibility or difficulty of directly applying some humanities content and the lack of accountability in this area partly explain the undervaluation of these disciplines, both in academia and among the public. Given that humanistic education has intrinsic value (Torralba, 2022), we can also advance in ways to demonstrate this value and its utility by understanding the impact it generates on individuals or institutions. In this way, we do not reduce the value of knowledge to its usefulness, as has been done when linking the importance of other knowledge to its capacity to generate innovation and interest in industry (Fernández de Lucio et al., 2011).

Humanities in higher education have undergone a process of deterioration that seemed to spread slowly over the last few decades. While it is true that there are internationally renowned universities still considered strongholds of the Humanities, such as Harvard, Yale, or Stanford in the United States; Oxford and Cambridge in the United Kingdom; or Heidelberg and the Freie Universität Berlin in Germany—reflecting the ongoing prestige of this academic field in certain institutions—the global reality has shown a downward trend. Worldwide, the humanities are experiencing a crisis of relevance, as reflected in the decrease in their presence both in university curricula and in the allocation of resources for these disciplines, which is inversely proportional

to the support for technological disciplines. This situation has led to intense debate among academics, students, and politicians. While the magnitude of this crisis varies by country, there is no doubt that the Humanities are undergoing a period of uncertainty and transformation (Llovet et al., 2016), precisely when society needs them the most.

European universities lack adequate tools and specific metrics to assess and recognize the social impact of the humanities (Giménez-Toledo, 2018), which limits their development and discourages funding and participation in humanities projects and their transfer to society. The international CoARA initiative, in its Declaration signed by hundreds of institutions in July 2022, points out the need for specific recognition of each scientific field and its unique evaluation, as well as advancing towards a new culture of evaluation that achieves greater scientific and social impact. This affects both the evaluation of knowledge generation and its definition and transfer to society (Christensen, 2003; Alavi & Leidner, 2001).

The transfer of humanistic knowledge includes education in values and virtues both on and off university campuses. However, how we measure its social impact or how we evaluate the results of that transfer is what we aim to address in this research, which we explain below.

Literature Review and Current State of Knowledge

In recent decades, debates regarding the evaluation of knowledge transfer in universities have opened up various needs and broader perspectives, among which the need to measure the social impact of different social interactions between professors and the university stands out (Castro-Martínez et al., 2013). One example of a social interaction is how the knowledge of the humanities and social sciences can help achieve more humane development in African cities (De Beer, 2014).

The humanities contribute specific knowledge and values, as recognized by the European Commission: "The European Research Area is not limited to science and technology; it also encompasses the humanities, from the arts and language to anthropology and philosophy, and from history and the study of religions to the study of culture and media. This area of knowledge helps Europeans understand their identity, supports the European integration process, provides benchmark information, and enables responsible and sustainable innovation" (CORDIS EU). Key European policies in higher education, such as the Bologna Process and the Ljubljana Process, emphasize the importance of social engagement and knowledge production for competitiveness and innovation. Furthermore, the recognition of the "third mission" of universities, which focuses on social interaction beyond formal education and research, has gained traction in both European and Anglo-Saxon contexts (Alonso et al., 2021). Traditionally, this mission has been linked to market-oriented activities, including agreements between universities and businesses, patent generation, and entrepreneurship.

Despite these advances, significant limitations persist. Current frameworks for evaluating knowledge transfer, predominantly designed for scientific and technological fields, do not adequately capture the social impact of the humanities (Castro-Martínez et al., 2008). The EU Council's recommendation on the guiding principles for the valorization of knowledge, dated December 2, 2022, highlights the need to adapt evaluation systems to include the civic and social value added by the disciplines of social sciences, humanities, and the arts, emphasizing that

these areas require adapted methodologies and metrics. This need for specific evaluation is crucial to recognizing and valuing humanistic knowledge, which has historically been underestimated and insufficiently studied (Elzinga, 2022).

Gaps and Limitations in Existing Research

While there have been efforts to recognize the social impact of the humanities, such as through the ENRESSH project (European Network for the Evaluation of Social Science and Humanities Research, initially called EvalHum), these efforts remain insufficient. ENRESSH developed several guidelines for evaluating research in the social sciences and humanities, mapped the research evaluation systems in different European countries to understand their specificities and how they manage research in the social sciences and humanities, and developed indicators to assess the social impact of research in these fields (such as case studies of impact). However, this initiative focused on the evaluation of research (the 2nd university mission) and did not address the specific evaluation of knowledge transfer (the 3rd university mission) in the humanities or the limitations in recognizing professors and universities in their efforts to transfer humanistic knowledge. This, in turn, creates an obstacle if we want to comply with recent EU policy recommendations, including the conclusions of the Council on the New European Research Area (November 2023) and EU guidelines for promoting common European values. Valorization of knowledge is also recognized as a priority in the ERA Political Agenda 2022-24.

Why is It So Important?

The humanities have played a crucial role in the origin, history, and central development of universities themselves (Gertz, 2017), influencing all aspects of human life, from culture, ethics, and politics to education, art, and philosophy. For instance, concepts such as democracy, justice, free will, critical thinking, intercultural understanding, and human rights have roots in philosophical research; history helps create collective memory and understand the successes and failures of past civilizations, so we can learn valuable lessons that influence governance, cultural preservation, and social development. Promoting innovation and the quality of humanities in universities can be applied to a wide range of issues, such as better teaching of the Chinese language (Jin & Yi, 2017). This role is irreplaceable in fostering long-term reflection in today's world to solve pressing, multifaceted problems such as immigrant integration, intolerance, inequalities, injustice, the ethical implications of technological advances, climate change, or the implementation of a concept of "liquid truth" in the age of post-truth, among others. Without recognizing the intermediaries (universities and professors) in this transfer of humanistic knowledge, progress cannot be made (Mooney Smith, 2011). This is especially important if we want to preserve and strengthen the so-called "European values" that the European Union (EU) has sought to codify and articulate in its foundational and constitutional documents (such as the Treaty on European Union and the Charter of Fundamental Rights of the European Union). The challenges of the 21st century, without an interdisciplinary analysis that properly includes the humanities, may continue to be limited in their understanding and responses. Without an appropriate framework to evaluate and recognize this discipline,

European policies will remain underestimated and vague in terms of what they have so often stated in their principles and values (Compagnucci & Spigarelli, 2020; Loi & Di Guardo, 2015).

Universities have within their mission humanistic principles aimed at contributing to social cohesion, public service, and the common good (Pascagaza & Barriga, 2022). However, when it comes to reporting, the metrics for assessing the impact of university knowledge transfer to society—metrics that can be used to evaluate the work of university professors or the universities themselves—barely reflect this type of social transfer of humanistic values.

If professors and universities are neither asked nor recognized for making this transfer, they will be limited to academic or purely research-driven work. Therefore, it is necessary to build a common framework to evaluate the transfer and social impact of the humanistic knowledge generated by university faculty (Guetzkow et al., 2004). In this way, higher education institutions will be encouraged to contribute to societal improvement from a humanistic perspective and to build the positive moral ecology we desperately need.

We have just lived through an unprecedented crisis, the dramatic COVID-19 pandemic, which has made us realize the importance of universities' contributions in addressing global challenges by integrating knowledge transfer and the humanities (Leonard et al., 2020). As previously mentioned, the irreplaceable role of the humanities in fostering long-term reflection and addressing the complex challenges facing humanity, including the preservation and dissemination of human values, is crucial not only for society and governance but also for geopolitical purposes in the context of the growing influence of China and the U.S. (Knudsen et al., 2021). Now is the time to leverage strong dialogue and cooperation to design and implement new mechanisms for evaluating the third mission of universities (De la Torre et al., 2021) and the potential impacts of transferring humanistic knowledge to society, politics, culture, and the economy.

How Can We Advance Towards This New System?

Our contribution from the Universidad Francisco de Vitoria aims to gather as many universities as possible to work together on a system for recognizing and measuring social impact through innovative approaches in this field by developing tools that allow us to understand and address complex social interactions. Creating holistic frameworks to assess the social impact of research outcomes and knowledge transfer in the humanities—acknowledging its uniqueness compared to other sciences—will allow progress in recognizing and investing in this field, which must be opened up to social interactions (Jongbloed et al., 2008) between the university and other social agents as well as between professors and students within universities.

We will continue studying, along with other universities and institutions, the best way to develop a framework of metrics for transfer and social impact well-adapted to the humanities and social sciences, containing a set of specific outcome indicators for this transfer to society, which will help highlight and recognize the social impact of both faculty and universities.

There are key trends emerging from global initiatives such as CoARA, DORA, and the Leiden Manifesto, which indicate that it is feasible for humanities evaluations to be more holistic and impact-based. Let's consider specific measures:

1. **Increased Focus on Social and Cultural Impact:** There is growing recognition that research in the humanities has significant social, cultural, civic, and ethical impacts that go beyond citation counts or publications in journals. Some evaluation systems are trying to incorporate social impact assessments that measure how humanities research influences public policies, education, cultural understanding, and ethical frameworks. However, the focus on "measurement" implies the persistence of quantitative approaches that tend to be short-term (the idea of immediate quantitative impact), meaning that humanities research which provides long-term cultural or ethical impact (such as reshaping views on justice, history, or identity) may be overlooked in favor of work that provides more immediate results. This limits the scope of transfer in the humanities and discourages scholars from tackling broader and deeper questions that require prolonged study. This narrow approach could lead to fewer innovative works in philosophy, history, and literature, ultimately weakening society's ability to engage with complex ethical, social, and cultural issues over time. (If humanities scholars are incentivized to focus more on introspective academic research to meet evaluation criteria, they might engage less with broader social issues and public debates where their perspectives are needed, leading to poorer decision-making in areas such as public policy, educational reform, and community cohesion). The new system will address the challenge of considering intangible social impacts that influence culture, ethics, education, and public understanding in ways that are not easily captured by traditional metrics and will incorporate measurement tools for the social influence and change generated by the transfer of humanistic knowledge, including qualitative assessments such as peer reviews, narrative-based evaluations, and expert judgment.
2. **Integration of Public Engagement and Outreach:** In some cases, public engagement and outreach activities are gaining importance in the evaluation of knowledge transfer in the humanities. This includes recognizing scholars who contribute to public understanding through media, digital humanities projects, or community-based research. However, significant limitations remain regarding the academic recognition of diverse products beyond traditional academic publications, such as artistic presentations, exhibitions, translations, digital archives, public history projects, and participation in social initiatives. These activities often fail to truly incentivize researchers to engage with broader audiences outside the academic sphere and do not reinforce the relevance of humanities research in shaping public understanding and social change. There is also a need to fully define how to consider legacy, as many humanities works, such as books or essays, have a longer lifespan and can influence generations of thinkers. This will also be addressed in the new evaluation framework for humanities transfer, which would facilitate intellectual reputation and influence built through a combination of publications, conference presentations, knowledge transfer collaborations, invited lectures, and peer reviews.
3. **Recognition of Interdisciplinary Work:** Interdisciplinary research, particularly projects that combine the humanities with science, technology, engineering, and mathematics (STEM), is increasingly valued, for example, within the EU's Horizon Europe research framework. Humanities researchers working in fields such as artificial intelligence ethics, environmental studies, or biomedical humanities are gaining recognition for their

ability to bring ethical, historical, and cultural perspectives to complex issues. The challenge is that humanities researchers working in interdisciplinary fields may receive less recognition for their intellectual contributions than their counterparts in STEM, even when their work is essential to addressing the ethical, social, or historical dimensions of complex problems. As a result, humanities researchers may shy away from interdisciplinary collaborations, losing opportunities to address critical social issues that require a broad range of perspectives. The new system must integrate recognition of such contributions in projects and their knowledge transfer plans.

4. Respect for Institutional Autonomy, Academic Freedom, and Regional or National Contexts: Finally, as a general principle, it is important to recognize that there are already widely agreed-upon frameworks of common values in human rights declarations, UNESCO documents, EU foundational principles, and the legislative frameworks of each country's universities. Therefore, it is not necessary to further specify the humanistic values and vision to be transferred to society, as these should be aligned with the aforementioned frameworks and respect institutional autonomy, academic freedom, and the specific circumstances of each country or region. What is needed, instead, is to identify how to build a common framework to value the transfer and impact of these humanistic values, one that is also consensual and contains a set of concrete outcome indicators for that transfer to society.

Conclusion

The evaluation framework proposed in this communication aims to be a standardized and agreed-upon model that will allow European and other universities to systematically evaluate the social and cultural benefits derived from research, education in values and virtues, and all humanistic activities. Through international collaboration, new metrics need to be developed to measure the degree of influence of a knowledge transfer action on society and to create indicators tailored to the unique characteristics of the humanities. To ensure adaptability, practical tools and guidance will be provided to facilitate the implementation of these metrics in different university contexts, taking into account each university's mission, cultural context, and tradition of social transfer.

Additionally, the framework should include policy recommendations and strategic guidelines for integrating these evaluations into university policies. This holistic approach aims to enhance the recognition and appreciation of the humanities in both academic and societal spheres. By providing concrete and measurable evidence of the humanities' value, the framework will support greater resource allocation and strengthen the role of the humanities in addressing contemporary social challenges.

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