The Humanities, Interdisciplinarity, and the Mission of the University

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Introduction

It is almost an overly tired cliché to say that the humanities is now in crisis. As the group of academic disciplines that many perceive to be 'useless' or 'incapable of generating income,' the humanities have received severe criticisms and actual cutbacks or neglects not only in universities in the west (e.g., Weal, 2021; Bakare and Adams, 2021), including Japan (Jenkins, 2015), but also in Thailand (นาควัชระ, BE 2538). It seems that the talk about the humanities being in crisis is almost as old as the study of the humanities in the modern university itself. Talks about the crisis in the humanities came to the fore as early as the 1960's and has remained largely unabated ever since. During the first quarter of the twenty-first century, things have been made more serious by the transformation of universities, including those in Thailand, under the influence of the neoliberal ideology. Traditionally conceived of as the place where inquiries into the nature of the physical world, the human society and values, among others, are investigated, the university is being threatened to become merely an arm of the business corporations, where the traditional inquiry is shadowed by the need to supply graduates to the corporations. In other words, the university is under a threat to become a business on its own, generating revenue through its services and products, namely the graduates, to the business world. There is nothing inherently wrong in this, as we shall see in the paper, but we need to find a balance between the traditional inquiry, which obviously includes the works of the humanities departments, and its services to the business sector, as well as to the government and society at large.

Apart from the talks about the humanities being in crisis, another type of common talks among the academic circles is those about interdisciplinarity. Calls are being made continuously about the need for academic disciplines to work together across the traditional disciplines. The rationale is that today's problems have become hugely complex, eluding the attempts of single academic discipline to tackle effectively. Interdisciplinary teaching programs are in vogue, as with double or joint degree programs either across various schools in the same campus or across universities. However, for scholars to work together effectively across disciplines numerous difficult challenges must be met, not least among which are the different cultures that are inherent in different disciplines themselves. This is not to mention the equally difficult task of calibrating diverse administrative challenges when disciplines that are to work together belong to different administrative units within the university.

Perhaps we can talk about there being two crises, the first one pertaining to the humanities, and the second on the interdisciplinary challenges. However, I think these two discourses are in fact symptoms of one single underlying cause, and once we fully grasp it, perhaps a way toward a solution of these problems could be found. What I would like to aim for in this paper, then, is that a lasting solution of the problems besetting the humanities, and

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consequently the university, would not be viable if we did not address these two domains together. That is, a solution to the crisis in the humanities must include a recognition of the importance of interdisciplinarity. I will further argue that the solution proposed here fulfills the mission of the university. In other words, fulfilling the mission of the university, usually conceived of as consisting of teaching, research, and community service, would not be possible unless the humanities and interdisciplinary effort are taken into consideration. These traditional three roles of the university, furthermore, do not exist in a vacuum. As the university is a part of society, these three roles are essential for the healthy continuation of society itself as well as its flourishing.

Crisis in the Humanities

Many scholars have claimed the huge importance of humanistic studies in fulfilling the mission of the university. Martha Nussbaum has published an ardent plea for the important of the humanities as necessary for a healthy democracy (Nussbaum, 2010). For Nussbaum, the skills that are crucial for a healthy society, and which can only be inculcated by the humanities are: "the ability to think critically; the ability to transcend local loyalties and to approach world problems as a 'citizen of the world'; and, finally, the ability to imagine sympathetically the predicament of another person" (Nussbaum, 2010, p. 7). We will discuss this in more detail in the section on how interdisciplinarity and the humanities are interconnected and how they are vital to the functioning of a whole society afterwards. As for the crisis in the humanities itself, Benjamin Schmidt (Schmidt, 2018) says that perhaps the earliest mention of a crisis in the humanities is in a book edited by J. H. Plumb in 1964. In Schmidt's words, Plumb "warned that a science-focused world left no room for humane pursuits" (Schmidt, 2018). This still rings true today. Science has proven to be tremendously effective in almost all areas of human endeavor. The humanities, on the contrary, have lagged and do not seem to produce any tangible results. It takes no great imagination to see that the products of scientific research are everywhere. The computer with which I am typing this essay, and air-conditioner in my room, the wifi internet pervading the air in my room, are all products of scientific knowledge through technological innovation. On the contrary, humanities subjects such as history, literature, and philosophy do seem to produce only words and more words—no computer, no wifi, no air-conditioner, only books and articles, and talks. No wonder that the humanities are in a crisis. To the eyes of the politicians who pull the strings of the public purse, it takes no imagination to see that they would prefer to put their money on the scientific disciplines first before the humanities.

The threats to the humanities are both real and pervasive. A few years ago, Silpakorn University planned to downgrade the status of its department of philosophy, threatening to change it to a kind of a subunit in a larger unit consisting not just of philosophy, but presumably other humanities disciplines (อจ. ศิลปากร, BE2561; 'ยุบภาคปรัชญา,' BE2561). Even though the administration of Silpakorn finally backed down from their plan, their intention showed a lack of appreciation of the values of the humanities, clearly an indication of the crisis of the humanities felt here in Thailand. Moreover, the crisis is present not only in Thailand. In 2015, the Japanese government proposed to cut the budget allocated to the faculties of humanities and social sciences throughout the country, so that academic programs in Japanese universities better respond to the needs of society (Jenkins, 2015). The move was immediately followed by an uproar from the academic community, who saw that the cut would drastically reduce Japan's stature as an academic leader. Furthermore, in the US, several academic departments in the humanities are facing budget cuts, some of which would likely result in the departments being unable to function any further (Budget Cuts, 2021). For example, Marquette University terminated the contracts of dozens of faculty members, most of whom were humanities or social science professors (Falk, 2021), and Marquette is certainly not alone in this trend (Falk,

2021). If anything, these cuts and plans to downgrade or dissolve humanities departments and programs show clearly that the crisis is real and concerted effort is needed to understand it. However, this picture of schools dissolving humanities programs belies an important fact. Science will not be able to produce any of the wonders in our home and beyond if not for technology. The two are so intertwined that sometimes it makes more sense to coin a new word, 'technoscience,' to describe the two together in one word. In fact, science alone does not fare any better than the humanities; it is only its close connection with technological adaptation that makes the science subjects more desirable in the eyes of the administrators. Pure scientific disciplines, such as theoretical physics, astronomy, or advanced mathematics, are so arcane and remote from practical applications that their situation is scarcely better than that of the humanities. Viewed together, then, it is also appropriate to look at the situation and say that both the humanities and the pure sciences are in a crisis together. Graduates in physics and mathematics in Thai universities complain that they cannot find jobs that are directly related to their education. The situation is almost the same as in the humanities, except that the humanities in this case might even fare a little better because, as they cannot fully claim any profession to be their own, any job can fit with their profile. Thus, we find students from the humanities faculties working in all kinds of job, depending on their preferences and their opportunities. Graduates in the pure science subjects usually expect jobs that fit perfectly with their training, and when those are hard to come by, they seem to suffer more as a result.

Thus, it is not science or the humanities alone that is the cause of the crisis; it is the relation of an academic subject to the possibility of finding jobs, of linking to a particular profession, of making quick money to be blunt, that are responsible. Students thus prefer to enter the engineering faculty than the faculty of science. They are not to blame; perhaps it is the expectation of their parents, or their own perception that engineering is more lucrative than either pure science or pure humanities. In any case, this shows that the crisis in the humanities (and in the pure sciences, for that matter), is related not to the actual content of the subjects itself, but to whether the content can be related to getting easy jobs or making easy money. This understanding of the nature of the crisis makes it rather straightforward to find a solution.

Why Interdisciplinary Studies are Important

What I would like to propose is that the crisis of the humanities can be resolved if the humanities disciplines open themselves up and collaborate with other disciplines. The whole reason for the crisis is partly due to the humanities being rather insular. Scholars in the traditional disciplines in the humanities tend to talk and write only among themselves. For example, it was a big trend among the analytic philosophers for many years to discuss the definition of the term 'knowledge,' or, in other words, to analyze the concept of knowledge. Traditionally, epistemologists believed that the concept of knowledge should be analyzed as justified, true belief: A piece of belief becomes a piece of knowledge by being true and justified, namely supported by strong evidence or reason. However, this traditional belief was criticized by Edmund Gettier, who, in 1963, published a three-page paper presenting a number of counterexamples to the traditional view (Gettier, 1963). The paper generated a very large number of subsequent papers either defending the traditional view or criticizing Gettier for not having done enough. The point is that even among philosophers themselves this seems to be an arcane exercise, a clear example of epistemologists talking among themselves, being interested in a very small question that does not seem to have any bearing to solving the world's problem. This is only one example from philosophy, which is one of the humanities disciplines. Surely other examples can be found from other humanistic disciplines. Scholars in history or literature discussing, say, an obscure manuscript from the first century AD would be in the same category in this sense. These examples seem to show how the humanistic disciplines can appear detached and out of touch with the world.

Nonetheless, it can be objected that this apparent detachment can appear in the sciences and mathematics too, and even more so, because the language in science and mathematics is such that it is impenetrable to the lay reader, whereas at least the language used in research works in literature or history seems to be more intelligible to the lay reader. This is a valid point. While one could also add that at least science and mathematics aim at understanding the natural world, whereas the study of first-century manuscript is not, the point is that valid rationales can be found for any type of scholarly activity. The study of first-century manuscript could yield very important insight that is highly useful to the world, but to the perception of most people in the administration and the public, such endeavors appear self-serving and does not contribute anything tangible to society.

A reason why these endeavors appear arcane and self-serving is that they talk only among themselves. Thus, opening up scholarly walls and allowing scholars to talk and collaborate across disciplinary terrain should ameliorate the situation. One contribution of interdisciplinary studies and research is that it is aimed specifically to address the existing problems in society directly. So, scholars are called to investigate these concrete problems and to come out of their traditional domains and employ their skills in tackling the problems. For example, bioethics is a fruitful interdisciplinary study. Here philosophers and ethicists are called to investigate and analyze real-world problems that occur every day in clinical settings. Advances in medical sciences and technologies have made it such that there are choices that can be made which were not available before. Decisions on the best way to make these choices thus are not merely a technical or algorithmic matter, but belief systems and values are inextricably involved. This is where ethics can collaborate with the medical sciences. Another example is history of science, where the historians employ their skills in reading and evaluating historical sources to construct narratives and explanations about the development of scientific endeavors. This can help illuminate why a particular scientific field of study has turned out the way it is. Real world problems, such as climate change, urban planning, or the aging society, does not lend themselves to any single disciplinary perspective, but they require collaborative effort. Climate change is a particularly apt example, because it requires collaborative effort from scholars from all disciplines to tackle the problem, which comes in a very large variety of dimensions.

A more detailed example should elaborate some of the rationales for interdisciplinarity further. I have mentioned earlier the relatively new discipline of bioethics. Originally, the discipline emerged from the concern of certain philosophers and medical scientists that the practice of medicine had become 'dehumanized' (Pellegrino, 1999). As a result, scholars attempt to remedy the situation by introducing the humanistic disciplines such as ethics and other humanities subjects into the curriculum. According to Edmund Pellegrino, the discipline of bioethics emerged when humanist scholars collaborated with medical scientists and introduced elements of philosophical ethics into the study as well as deliberations in clinical settings. However, as problems in medical field have proliferated and become more complex, ethicists found themselves collaborating with scholars in other social scientific and humanistic fields, such as lawyers, sociologists, economists, and so on. As a result, bioethics has become a very diverse fields, where scholars from different academic fields talk to and work with one another. This is an important aspect of interdisciplinarity. At first ethicists talked to medical scientists and practitioners; then philosophical methods were used to analyze problems arising from the practice. Then, in Pellegrino's 'third' stage, bioethics has become truly interdisciplinary and global. We can see that the aspect of interdisciplinarity is in the collaborations and the willingness to learn from and to communicate with scholars and practitioners in other fields. What results is a complete merging of disciplines; the situation is unlike that of the multidisciplinary setting, where different disciplines maintain their identities and their domains are merely juxtaposed. The emergence of bioethics itself as a new,

interdisciplinary, academic discipline shows that when integration is successful, the result is the birth of a new scholarly endeavor capable of responding to the challenges posed by the newly emerging technologies in medicine and bioscience. The endeavor is an integration of various disciplines, such as ethics, medical sciences, law, sociology, psychology, to name but a few, from the beginning.

Another emerging interdisciplinary endeavor is digital humanities. This is the result of the mixture and collaboration between the humanities and the digital technologies and their related disciplines. Digital humanities has proven to be useful in many areas, such as digital archive, cultural analytics, textual mining, and so on. It has been found that information technologies can help the works of the humanities scholars tremendously and in various ways. Scholars interested in applying information and other forms of digital technologies in their works gradually found themselves working more in an emerging discipline altogether. David Berry recounts the story of digital humanities from its origin as 'computers in the humanities' (Berry, 2012, pp. 1-20) that were seen as only technical support to the scholars, to its becoming a discipline in its own right. In fact, the coining of the term 'digital humanities' signifies that the discipline has become mature and capable of existing independently (Berry, 2012, pp. 2-3). That is, the emergence of the field of digital humanities is an interdisciplinary effort, starting from the use of computers to aid the works of the traditional scholars, to the formation of an independent discipline with its own research agenda, conferences, scholar journals, and so on. The objectives of digital humanities as a discipline. More specifically, Berry divides the development of digital humanities into three waves. The first wave started when computer technology was employed to aid traditional research. The second wave, on the contrary, focuses on the literary medium itself, which is mediated by technology. Phenomena such as interactive fiction or postings on the social media are those that are made possible by the technology itself. On top of this, Berry suggests a third wave, where the *computationality* of the media becomes the object of focus. In other words, the third wave investigates how the computer codes that constitute the computer media—the subject matter of the second wave—itself becomes an object of study (Berry, 2012, p. 5). In other words, the third wave represents a more complete integration of the digital technology and the traditional humanistic domain. Instead of looking at the products of the codes (interactive fiction, social media postings, etc.), Berry proposes that the codes themselves become the object of scholarly attention in the humanistic way; furthermore, the third wave also problematizes the usual methodological apparatuses that are prevalent in the first and second waves (Berry, 2012, p. 5).

It should be noted that even though these new disciplines emerged out of the need to find answers for society, it does not mean that they can always remain fixed where they are either. It is possible that these disciplines such as bioethics, digital humanities, etc. can become self-serving, answering only to their own objectives. That is why constant renewal, self-criticism, and opening to external critical perspectives are essential. Furthermore, the collaboration of academic disciplines resulting in interdisciplinarity can, moreover, be made more tightened in such a way that the identities of the collaborating disciplines are fused, and a new discipline emerges (Max-Neef, 2005; Nicolescu, 2014; Bernstein, 2015). This fusing of the identities is known as 'transdisciplinarity,' which could be regarded as a radicalization of interdisciplinarity, while interdisciplinarity refers only to collaborations among various disciplines where each retains its identity. The emergence of bioethics discussed above could also be seen as an example of transdisciplinarity in the sense that the new discipline, bioethics, emerges out of fusion of philosophy and the medical sciences. Cognitive science is another example, where the field itself arises out of the collaboration among various fields such as computer science, linguistics, neuroscience, and philosophy. However, for the purpose of this paper, what I am proposing is that interdisciplinarity, and not necessarily transdisciplinarity, is needed for fulfilling the mission of the university, and since interdisciplinarity is a precursor

of transdisciplinarity, achieving the former is necessary for achieving the latter, and thus we need to achieve the former first.

In conclusion, the reasons why interdisciplinarity (and also transdisciplinarity) is important for today's university is that it directly addresses the problems that emerge from the real situation in the world without paying undue attention to disciplinary walls. Instead of putting the problems under the already existing categories established by the disciplines, interdisciplinarity and transdisciplinarity seek to dissolve those walls and focus its attention to the problems themselves, making use of the disciplines as the process of searching for a solution moves along. In the sciences, this can also be seen in the emergence of such well known new disciplines as cognitive science, which seeks to understand our cognitive abilities through a collaboration of various academic disciplines. Like bioethics, cognitive science emerged out of collaborations among scholars from various disciplines who shared a common goal in searching for answers to common questions, answers which cannot be given through one single discipline alone. However, given its importance, it is still a challenge to institute interdisciplinary studies and research within the confine of the university, as there are many challenges that still need to be sorted out. One such challenge is how to manage interdisciplinary programs; another is the employability prospect of graduates in an interdisciplinary program. However, these problems are complex and need to be addressed in another paper.

How the Humanities and Interdisciplinarity Fulfil the Mission of the University
It is generally recognized that the modern university fulfils three main functions, namely teaching, research, and service to the community. More specifically, the missions consist of (1) transmission of the best knowledge, skills, and culture that the older generation cares to give to the younger, (2) production of new knowledge in various fields to push the horizon of knowing for humanity further and to solve the technical problems that arise in the course of living together, and (3) to contribute in one way or another to the well-being of society outside of the university itself. It should be noted that the purpose of these three missions is ultimately to serve the goals of society in which the university is a part. In other words, the main purpose of teaching and research is to serve society; furthermore, the third mission is quite obscure, and it is rightly so because it should be wide enough for society to demand whatever it needs from the university. In any case, what I am proposing is that the humanities and interdisciplinary studies can contribute substantially to all these missions, and, more importantly, these missions cannot be *effectively* fulfilled without the roles that the humanities and interdisciplinarity play together.

Many scholars of higher education and related fields have in fact recognized this important role played by the humanities and interdisciplinarity. Paul Jay has the following to say:

> *For all of these reasons, the humanities in the twenty-first century ought, more than ever, to rely on—and teach—professional approaches to critical thinking grounded in disciplinary and interdisciplinary theories and methodologies, and to stay focused on connecting the texts, authors, and ideas it teaches to broad questions about power, agency, and social justice, and to do it all in a global context (Jay, 2014, p. 145).*

What Jay has in mind is that the humanities need to work together in an interdisciplinary way to address the political, historical, cultural, social contexts that surround whatever text that is the focus of the study. This clearly shows how the humanities itself cannot fail to connect closely with other fields of study, and other dimensions of society. Reading a text, to take an example from Jay's own concern, should not involve purging the text of its critical package; the humanities, in other words, cannot fail to be political, and reading and engaging with the

text will help the student become sharper in their critical abilities, honing the skills that will be essential for them to become a fully functioning member of a democratic society. Furthermore, Jay proposes that the activity should be done in a global context where visions and goals of people from diverse cultural domains are put together in such a way that the student learns to break away from their limited confine and to begin to see the world through a broader perspective.

The view that it is only the humanities that is perfectly suited at least to be a member in any interdisciplinary effort that contains social and cultural dimensions is presented by Julie Klein. According to Klein,

> *Nowhere, though, is the genealogical reach of interdisciplinarity longer than it is in humanities. The underlying ideas of synthesis, holism, connectedness, and general knowledge developed in ancient Greek philosophy were transmitted throughout the history of liberal education. Along with the Renaissance tradition of studia humanitatis, these ideas were accorded central place in the first American college (Klein, 2005 p. 3).*

The "genealogical reach of interdisciplinarity" here means that the humanities has the longest history of interdisciplinary effort. Foundational concepts of interdisciplinary are all found in the humanistic disciplines, mostly philosophy, which started from the Greeks up toward the present day. Thus, Klein shows that the humanities has had a very long period of connection with interdisciplinarity, and it is this connection that serves as the foundation for the early American colleges, and hence, in turn, the contemporary university in general.

But how does this interconnection contribute to the fulfilment of the traditional missions of the university? As for teaching, this is clear in the sense that teaching is the transmission, not only of the content of knowledge, but of skills, values, beliefs, various aspects of culture, from one generation to another. This is the vital function of a society, without which the society cannot exist. The transmission cannot involve only the scientific or purely technical fields, because those are too narrow, and the functions of *culturing* the younger generation—growing them (the original sense of the term 'culture') so that they become fully functioning members of the society—cannot be accomplished through scientific and technical skills alone. It is true that the expectation from various sources does not seem to pay much attention to this *cultural* (or cultivational) aspect of teaching; instead, they talk more about preparing students to become members of the workforce in the industry. However, as Nussbaum has mentioned, the survival of a democratic society cannot be sustained if society neglects these cultural aspects, because it is the values and goals of the very society in which the students will become members that is at issue. Values and goals cannot consist of material gains alone because the latter derive their value only through the former. Without the vision provided by a clear understanding of the values that constitute what kind of society that one should live in, exclusive emphasis on material gains will likely result in one kind of cultural values dominating everybody, a perfect environment for tyranny.

The fulfilment of the research mission is, secondly, a rather straightforward matter. As previously discussed, the emergence of disciplines such as bioethics, cognitive science, and digital humanities attests to the fact that certain research questions admit of no single disciplinary perspective, and much has been gained through collaborative efforts among different disciplines. In fact, these three paradigmatic examples of interdisciplinary endeavors have the humanities subject as its core. Bioethics, as previously mentioned, started out with ethicists working together with medical scientists. Cognitive science has philosophy as one of its central components. The study of the mind has benefited greatly from contributions from philosophers of mind and of language, who proposed conceptual analyses and innovations that have contributed to the success of the field as a whole. Digital humanities, as its name shows, is already centered around the humanities; in this case it is the literary studies that pioneered

using computer technology to analyze and parse the texts, which then develops into the field that we know today. Whenever there are issues surrounding values and meanings involved, the humanities ineluctably finds itself becoming a member of the interdisciplinary team. This is necessary because modern science itself, by definition, is devoid of the questions and the questioning of values. Scientists, on the contrary, might think that they already possess the values, but that is true for everybody. The issue is not whether anybody possess a certain of values—everybody does, no matter if she is a scientist or not, but the issue is how to view those values and how to provide perspectives which involve looking into possibilities, scenarios that do not exist but could do so in the future. Since there are many of them, it requires the work of the critical imagination afforded by the humanist to provide this necessary aspect to the interdisciplinary effort.

The last mission, service, or contribution to society, is also one that needs input from the humanities and interdisciplinary studies within the university. The third mission is different from the previous in that it is here that the university reaches out to the wider public. The teaching mission is traditionally understood to be the affairs that take place only inside the university compound. Students enter the university, get educated, and only when they graduate are they allowed, unless they resign, to come out. The research mission is also mostly confined to the university campus. It is the third mission that specifies the necessary connection that the university has with its social and political environment. In medieval times, when universities were supported by the Church and had its own endowment and independence, this connection was not visible, or perhaps not present at all. However, in today's world, where most universities receive public funding, it is imperative that the university show how it does connect to the wider world in ways that are neither teaching nor research. This outreaching can take many forms. One form is for scholars or students to include the public in their activities; instead of talking only to members of the academia, universities can fulfil the third mission by inviting the public to participate or bringing out the activities that traditionally take place inside the campus to the public themselves. For example, professors and students can organize public events where a novel or a short story is read and discussed, and the public is invited to participate as equal members of the group. Insights and interpretations occurring through the reading and critical activities are then brought out to the public, resulting in the university becoming more inclusive. This can be a critical function especially in the case where the university itself is dependent on the public's good will and public money. However, usually professional services, such as those performed by members of the faculty who belong to the professional schools, are not included in the third mission here, but they are more accurately classified as professional services in themselves. That is, services performed by law professors in their professional capacity, such as providing legal services to members of the public, or by medical professors of providing medical treatment, should not be included as part of the third mission. The reason is that these professional professors already have their duties to the public as members of their professions. Thus, doctors who teach inside the university can provide their services in the university hospital. This should not be considered fulfilling the third mission because it is the mission of the hospital itself, but strictly speaking not the university. It is when the medical professors provide *academic* services to the public, such as when they provide knowledge to the public on medical matters, thereby giving knowledge to the public, that they do fulfil the third mission. Admittedly, the line between academic and professional services is blurry at best, but for the university to maintain its distinct identity as an academic institution, this may in fact be needed. Or perhaps professional services could be classified as secondary, where the primary function of fulfilling the third mission is more academic in nature, since it is through the latter that can result in the public's becoming more enlightened.

The humanities and interdisciplinarity can, then, fulfil the third mission through their roles in the activities that are designed to engage the public. Organizing reading groups is an

example, as we have seen. The aim here should be to help members of the public to become clearer about what they are reading or what they encounter through the media, and importantly to help them become more active critical thinkers. Another type of activity could be for scholars or students writing pieces intended for the public outside of the university. Today it has become far easier to do so with the advent of the Internet. Scholars and students can write public blogs, expressing their views and explaining things so that the public can read. Or they can engage in the social media such as Facebook or Twitter, where the public can "follow" certain scholars or students, thus being allowed to engage in discussions and to read whatever the scholars have to say on certain topics of public interest. In fact, engaging actively in the social media can be an effective way to reach out to the public and thus to fulfil the third mission. Since the humanities is by nature easier to reach out to the public than the sciences, it is natural that the humanities can reach out in this way. Moreover, the nature of the humanities to be more pliant, capable of engaging with a large variety of topics (witness bioethics and its discussion of matters of intense public interest such as palliative care or assisted reproduction), makes it ideal for reaching out to the public in an interdisciplinary manner.

Conditions that Need to be Met

The task for the humanities and interdisciplinary studies and research in fulfilling the mission of the university, however, cannot be accomplished unless certain conditions are met. Discussions of these necessary conditions have sadly been missing in most discourse on the role of the humanities and the crisis. It is not enough just to plug in the humanities and interdisciplinary programs and to expect that they can magically fulfil the mission. If that were the case, then many universities that have these programs would have been entirely successful, which is evidently not the case. I would like to propose the following conditions which would arguably result in becoming sufficient for the mission of the university.

First condition is critical thinking. Critical thinking and the humanities do go hand in hand. All the humanities disciplines—history, literature, philosophy, textual studies—aim at honing critical thinking skills in their respective ways. The idea is that in teaching the humanities subjects, one of the top priorities is to instill the sense and the skills of being a good critical thinker in the students. One of the most important contributions that the humanities disciplines can make for society is that it opens the possibilities and imaginative capabilities in the students. This opening up would not be possible if the students are trained, as many sadly still are, to think only according to preconceived paths or to think only about what they are told to do and about nothing else. Moreover, critical thinking also helps the students not to accept anything at face value, without examining whether it is worth believing or not. The proposal, then, is that the humanities programs, also perhaps in collaboration with other interdisciplinary programs, need to be able to train the students to become effective critical thinkers. This proposal leads directly to a discussion of the *quality* of the humanities and interdisciplinary programs that are supposed to fulfil the mission. A clear indication of the quality here is whether the students have been adequately and successfully trained to become critical thinkers or not.

The second condition is that the humanities and interdisciplinary programs need to be sufficiently supported by the administration. As the old adage says, an army runs on its stomach. In other words, logistics and supplies are everything for an army, and for every kind of operation. In fact, the support needed by the humanities is typically not as much as that in the sciences. In the sciences, there seems to be little research done on how much return the investment on scientific research in Thai universities has yielded. The conditions being outlined here are pertinent to the sciences too. Without critical thinking, or the kind of daring adventurous spirit that characterizes the search for new knowledge in science and the kind of iconoclasm that does not accept anything simply because it is there in the textbooks. These

skills and mindset are very much like the critical thinking skills inculcated in the humanities disciplines; in fact, we could say that they are one and the same. Material support is essential for the survival and flourishing of the humanities and interdisciplinary programs.

One might object that these programs should be able to gain their own income through teaching and other activities. That is true, but an exclusive focus on generating income would effectively turn these units into commercial enterprises, with the result that the university itself compromising on its mission. Let us note that none of the three missions of the university says anything about generating income. Material support for the university itself either comes from the government, the public, or both. Ideally speaking, the purpose of the support given to the university is that it be able to fulfil its missions. Thus, generating income is at most a secondary pursuit, done for the purpose of fulfilling the mission, not the mission itself. If the university can assure the public that their support will not fail and will produce an acceptable rate of return, both in form of monetary values and other forms of values such as flourishing of the society, then the public would be willing to continue the support. It is up to the university to be responsible for their part of the contract.

The third and final necessary condition is that, overall, *high quality* of the teaching and research and service must always be maintained. Speaking of this, I am not necessarily advocating a regime of quality assurances that are currently in vogue in many university and other organizations. Instead, what I have in mind is that the quality must be instilled as integral to the mindset of everyone involved in the university from the beginning. The university will fail in its contract with the society if it simply pastes over certain programs, dub them 'humanities,' or 'interdisciplinary,' or others, and leaves it at that. The interest of the whole university and its mission must always be consciously kept in mind, made to become second nature, and ways sought to implement those missions into practicable activities and results. In fact, this is the ideal purpose of any quality assurance scheme. The danger is that, by focusing only on the *appearances* of following the rubrics of quality assurance schemes and not its substance, the university will fail in its mission too.

These conditions, critical thinking, logistical support, and maintaining high quality, are not easy to accomplish. Many faculty members have noted the particular difficulty of working across academic disciplines, where different cultures and vocabularies persist. Nonetheless, this difficulty can be eventually overcome if one bears in mind that they are paths toward the success that has been outlined in the paper. Critical thinking, for example, can be set as a goal of a curriculum and individual courses. Logistic support is tremendously important, and these two will surely result in better quality of the programs and the university itself.

Conclusion

In this paper I have suggested that the humanities can become more relevant if the disciplines collaborate with one other, either within the humanities itself or outside, focusing on real world problems. Thus, the humanities and interdisciplinarity have a crucial role to play in how the university fulfils its mission. The crisis in the humanities may in fact be permanent, as the humanities would need to put itself in a crisis over and over in order to renew itself and to become critical of itself. In any case, the more material kind of crisis, resulting from lack of interest on the administrator's side, is real and hence needs to be addressed fully. However, in order for that to be possible, I have suggested three main necessary conditions that need to be there for such a fulfilment to be possible in the first place.

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