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# **The Humanities at a Crossroads: Challenges and Prospects in the (Post-)COVID-19 World**

## **Introduction: Higher education in the 21<sup>st</sup> century**

The last decades of the 20<sup>th</sup> century have been marked by extensive changes in higher education. These changes have been caused by several important factors, including globalization, the development of information technologies, the massification of higher education, and a shift from a paradigm of education as a public good to a paradigm of education as a private good (Altbach et al., 2009, pp. xxiii–xxiv). All these factors are intertwined and of equal importance for understanding the current situation in higher education. The world is connected more than ever, especially economically, and these interconnections are further enhanced by information technologies. Knowledge is more accessible, especially through the internet, so university staff and students can easily and quickly exchange their experiences and research

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results.<sup>1</sup> Communication between academics around the world is easier due to the dominance of the English language, which has become the lingua franca of science. Governments and universities encourage the mobility of students and teaching staff through various programmes, for example, ERASMUS.

The massification of higher education means that the number of students has been increasing since the second half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century due to demographic changes and the fact that higher education has ceased to be a privilege of the elite, and this number continues to grow<sup>2</sup> (for figures, see Altbach et al., 2009, p. vii; for OECD countries, see OECD, 2021, p. 49). With more demand and higher enrolment rates, it has become difficult for governments to provide enough funding for public universities. Thus, universities nowadays increasingly rely on tuition fees and relationships with the industrial sector in order to acquire material resources. This problem coincides with the emergence of “the idea of higher education as a private good-of benefit primarily to individual graduates and thus to be paid for mainly by the ‘users’ (students)” instead of the idea that universities are “places of intellectual and cultural life” (Altbach et al., 2009, pp. 12–13). The former idea of higher education was strongly supported and promoted in the eighties by neoliberal conservative politicians, predominantly in the UK and the USA.

The aforementioned social and political changes have led to the rise of market-oriented universities. Following the logic of neoliberal principles, universities have become focused on disciplines that can lure students and hence bring more money through tuition fees. These disciplines, like STEM majors, are very appealing because it is considered that they bring quick economic growth for society and wealth for individuals. Also, corporations that have interest in investing in technologies and skills that suit their needs fund only particular projects, which threatens to jeopardize the freedom of research. Universities and

<sup>1</sup> However, there are some serious questions concerning free knowledge and the sharing of research. Publishing academic journals and books has become a lucrative business that raises many ethical questions and debates. Writing and reviewing papers and books is a part of scholarly work and scholars usually do not get extra money for doing it. On the other hand, publishers charge high fees for access to journals and books that should either be free or whose price covers only printing and editing costs. For these reasons, in recent years many researchers have signed a petition against Elsevier (see *The cost of knowledge*, n.d.).

<sup>2</sup> It should be noted, though, that these numbers are currently growing mainly in developing countries, while the most-developed countries have rapidly aging populations, so they “have faced fluctuations in traditional-age student numbers and have also begun to respond to the new and unique demands of lifelong learning” (Altbach et al., 2009, p. 99).

research institutions compete among themselves for scarce resources and projects that can promise a stable job and income for only a couple of years. There is also a strong emphasis on public accountability, which is judged by ‘objective’ criteria: examples include whether the money that is invested in research can be returned to society and how; what the impact of a given research project is; or how high a particular institution is positioned on – widely criticized – university rankings (see, for example, Collini, 2012, 2017).

Disciplines – mainly the arts and humanities, but also fundamental sciences – that do not bring immediate profit or that cannot provide *measurable* results have been constantly failing to adjust to this new model of a corporate university. A lack of prospects for available and well-paid jobs discourages prospective students from enrolling in these programmes. This is especially the case in academia, where there are not enough positions due to department shutdowns or financial cutbacks.

The challenges in higher education that are indicated above were the subjects of many discussions<sup>3</sup> before COVID-19 pandemic. Although it is still hard to evaluate all the effects of the pandemic, it can be said with certainty that we are facing an economic crisis that is in many aspects unique, mainly because it is impossible to precisely predict the pandemic’s course and duration (see Borio, 2020; Milanovic, 2020). Fiscal austerity after the global financial crisis in 2008 imposed major cutbacks in higher education (see Pollitt & Bouckaert, 2017). Given the increased global debt and economic stagnation during the quarantine, the COVID-19 crisis will certainly provoke similar issues. Also, since spring 2020, the majority of universities and schools have transitioned to online or hybrid (online and live) teaching models. It remains to be seen how this change will affect the quality of education and what consequences it will have for students’ social lives, as well as for future students that did not receive regular primary or secondary education during the pandemic. On the other hand, online teaching models that, among other things, involve pre-recorded lectures might lead to a further reduction of university employees, especially in the light of the possible future austerity measures. The pandemic is already changing the ways in which many jobs are done, meaning some positions will vanish and others will predominate, which will also affect students’ career choices.

<sup>3</sup> There is a vast body of literature about the changes and challenges in higher education. Since it was impossible to cover all of it in one article, I have focused on sources that are relevant to the topic of my paper.

However, the COVID-19 crisis is not necessarily another reason to lament higher education's gloomy fate. Seen as the culmination of a long-term derogation of higher education, it may also be a wakeup call and an opportunity to reflect again on the goals of higher education, draw some new conclusions, and find new perspectives.

## **Are the humanities in *crisis*?**

Global changes in higher education in the last few decades have reshaped research and the position of the humanities at universities, which has proved to be a very vulnerable discipline in this new education system. Many scholars have already warned against the marginalization of the humanities and the impact of corporatized universities on research. They have proposed strong arguments in favour of the humanities and emphasised their essential role in democracies (for example, Brown, 2011; Costa, 2019; Fish, 2010; Nussbaum, 2010). On the other hand, researchers have also pointed out that the narrative of a *crisis* in humanities is not new or solely related to the emergence of a neoliberal vision of universities. On the contrary, "*the self-understanding of the modern humanities didn't merely take shape in response to a perceived crisis; it also made crisis a core part of the project of the humanities*" (Reitter & Wellmon, 2021, p. 3, emphasis in the original). In other words, the humanities have, paradoxically, been going through a *permanent crisis*<sup>4</sup> (Reitter & Wellmon, 2021) ever since they emerged as a discipline at universities, and the current situation in higher education is yet another manifestation of this. On the other hand, understanding *crises* – both internally (in a particular field and institution) and externally (in higher education and society) – and reflecting on potential solutions is one of the core values of research in humanities.

That being said, talking about *crises* in the humanities might not be the best way to describe their position in neoliberal universities and to consider their future. "Identifying a situation as a crisis can foreclose the possibility that it came about not because of an unexpected, sudden event, but because of chronic, even structural conditions" (Reitter & Wellmon, 2021, p. 20). Therefore, I will

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<sup>4</sup> The phrase *permanent crisis* is also a title of Reitter and Wellmon's book.

briefly analyse the long-term *changes* that the humanities and culture have been going through in the last few decades. Also, I argue that the position of the humanities at universities worsened dramatically after the economic crisis in 2008, and that we might see the culmination of that deterioration in the (post-)COVID-19 world, thus potentially leading to permanent damage to the humanities if no action is taken.

I will first delve into the challenges that were mainly induced by neoliberal principles and give some arguments in defence of the humanities. Every country and higher education institution that has gone through these changes has had its own specific development, particularly those that in some way followed the neoliberal path. Thus, I will outline some common features before I move to the higher education changes in Serbia and the specific example of the Faculty of Philology at the University of Belgrade.

## **The humanities at a crossroads**

The data shows that the overall number of students that graduate in humanities has been growing over the past few decades, but at a slower pace compared to STEM disciplines or business and law (see *OECD statistics*, n.d., Distribution of graduates and new entrants by field; see also Costa, 2019). However, since the global economic crisis in 2008, some countries, like the USA (and Serbia, to which I will return later), have seen a drop in enrolment in fields like history, native languages, literature, and philosophy (Schmidt, 2018). The decline in interest in the humanities may be explained by several factors that are caused by wider changes in culture and politics. Firstly, the humanities are seen as non-instrumental disciplines that do not have practical value and therefore do not contribute to economic growth. Secondly and in close relation to the first factor, STEM, business and law graduates have a better position in the job market than humanities graduates. Thirdly, humanities are often criticised as elitist and overly intellectual disciplines, and their scholars are seen as detached from the ‘real world’.

In relation to the criticism concerning non-instrumentality, I want to highlight an obvious fact: the humanities *are* non-instrumental disciplines. Their goal is to develop critical thinking and empathy, and to prepare people for civic participation and life in a democratic society (Brown, 2011; Nussbaum, 2010).

However, being non-instrumental does not mean being useless or without any value for society. As Collini suggests:

Indeed, if research in the humanities *is* valuable to society, as I certainly believe it is, it makes its contribution by extending and deepening our understanding of human activities across times and cultures, and if we divert our energies from doing that to the highest possible standard in order to meet a perceived short-term requirement to contribute economic impact, then we shall in fact be *lessening* the social contribution of scholarly research. (Collini, 2017, p. 226, emphasis in the original)

Understanding human behaviour takes time, patience, careful research, close reading, observations, debates, etc. It cannot be guided by the imperative of rapid applicability or economic development.

Another value of the humanities is their self-reflective nature. They constantly produce new understandings of society and culture. In the terms of the problem of the neoliberal vision of education that favours *practical* research, the self-reflective nature is not only beneficial for the humanities but also defends other disciplines, like the fundamental sciences, from vanishing in the new model of corporate university. Therefore, researchers in humanities have a twofold task: to criticize and prevent the decline of their profession, and to fight against the cultural model that led to this situation. The need to understand something – human behaviour, physical laws, the laws of nature, mathematical axioms – is in fact the essence of universities and it is the free choice of independent research that is at stake at corporate universities.<sup>5</sup> “The very argument that the humanities help students to resist our culture’s investment in practical utility is itself an argument for the practical utility of the humanities.” (Jay, 2014, p. 17) If all research is determined by investors’ interest and market logic, there will be no more free pursuit of knowledge, which is essential for new discoveries and paradigms.

The consequence of market-guided research was evident during the COVID-19 pandemic. The research on a vaccine for SARS viruses and, especially, mRNA technology was slow and ineffective because of a lack of resources (Dolgin, 2021). Once the world faced a global pandemic, resources were given to scientists and vaccines were quickly developed. The pandemic experience suggests that we cannot evaluate research anymore in the way we once did. A sole focus on immediate profit, which is one of the reasons for the decline of

<sup>5</sup> For example, University of Leicester closed its pure mathematics department to “meet the rising market demand of artificial intelligence, computational modelling, digitalisation and data science”, see: *Mathematics at the University of Leicester*, 2021.

humanities research, is also central to the poor response to COVID-19 crisis and the lack of medical solutions.

When it comes to employment issues, “[we] should certainly begin by recognizing that universities have always in part served practical ends and have always helped to prepare their graduates for employment in later life.” (Collini, 2017, p. 17) There is no inherent tension between the concepts of higher education as preparation for civic participation and higher education for employment: it should serve both purposes. However, employment does become problematic when STEM graduates have disproportionately higher salaries than humanities graduates or if salaries cannot secure housing and basic needs.

Furthermore, the global recession in 2008 intensified peoples’ anxiety about the future. Students started worrying about the job market, therefore they started choosing majors that they believed could guarantee secure and well-paid jobs (Schmidt, 2018). Universities received even less financial support from governments, which led to a rise in tuition fees and even closer relationships with the industrial sector. Since students often rely on student loans to pay for their education, they choose profitable disciplines in order to repay these debts after graduation. Neoliberal ideology affected not only the way universities are organized and students’ perspectives, it also affected teaching staff. Professors and researchers are forced to constantly compete among themselves and to choose research fields that might be appealing to funders. Also, application processes for projects and grants often involve a lot of administrative paperwork and banal questionnaires that rarely reflect the essence of humanistic research. In addition, researchers in humanities and natural sciences alike are often required to prove their hypothesis in order to acquire further funding. This is paradoxical and contradicts the logic of free and independent research that is precisely conducted because we still do not know the answers to our hypotheses. If governments decide to introduce more cutbacks after the pandemic due to a potential economic crisis, these trends will worsen, and some disciplines will become extinct due to the lack of resources and students.

Finally, the humanities are increasingly facing demands to be accountable to the public, therefore researchers often have to explain and defend the worthiness of their work. It is indeed important to help the public understand why some scholarly work matters, but its real value should be judged in a specific way and by an informed public (Collini, 2017, p. 41). Even if judged by an informed public, it can often be hard to estimate if something is worth researching.

The knowledge we have today is paved with failed attempts and ideas, which is why universities need autonomy and freedom to encourage independent work, even when it is economically *risky*. On the other hand, if the results of research are limited to academic circles or are achieved only for particular grants and projects, the humanities will lose their relationship with society.<sup>6</sup> This relationship is particularly important in the (post-)COVID-19 world.

Some of the main contributions of the humanities are people's participation in democratic society, development of critical thought, empathy, and imagination, all of which are crucial in a (post-)COVID-19 society. Humanities also emphasize the importance of community, tolerance and shared experiences. In times of uncertainty and crisis, people need to rely on each other and overcome their fear of the unknown. This can be achieved only through conversation and learning about others. Also, humanities graduates should be able to critically analyse discourse and therefore always make informed decisions, which is particularly important regarding vaccination decisions in situations like the COVID-19 pandemic. However, they also have to analyse and criticize reasons for governments' slow reactions and the unequal distribution of vaccines around the globe, and to ask why governments did not invest enough in SARS viruses before the COVID-19 pandemic, etc. Without the analytical and rhetorical skills that the humanities give us, our perception of the world is limited and speculative.

## **University of Belgrade – Faculty of Philology: A fresh start**

Higher education in the Republic of Serbia is facing most of the challenges that we have described, but it also has some specific ones due to contextual differences. As a society in transition from a socialist to a neoliberal capitalist state,<sup>7</sup> higher education and scientific research reforms in Serbia are ongoing.

<sup>6</sup> Going "from the street to the classroom", gender studies self-reflected their position at universities from the start. Researchers often criticized their fellow colleagues for being elitist, and trapped in theory, while losing the relationship with activism and the *real* world (Todorić Milićević, 2019).

<sup>7</sup> Problems of transition in Serbia include corruption, bad privatization, state monopoly, failed process of transitional justice, etc.

For example, in 2019, the government changed the way research institutions are organized<sup>8</sup> so as to encourage more applications for research projects (see “Закон о науци и истраживањима”, 2019). At first glance, this might seem like a good initiative that should lead to increased mobility and scholars becoming more connected with their colleagues around the world. However, it also means that institutions have to obtain necessary equipment and materials through projects and that the government will no longer cover most material costs. The government also created The Science Fund of the Republic of Serbia<sup>9</sup> in 2019 in order to promote research and fund research projects. However, The Fund finances far fewer projects than the government used to. Also, it turned out that this organization has been oriented towards disciplines that are closely related to industry:

Programs support technological development, advanced and innovative ideas, the development of human resources, laboratories and scientific infrastructure, integration into international science trends, cooperation between science and industry, and other topics that are of strategic and social significance. (*Programs*, n.d.)

Results from the first call for projects, called PROMIS, which was open for young researchers, clearly showed the dominance of natural, technical and medical sciences: out of 59 projects chosen for funding, only 6 were related to social sciences and humanities.<sup>10</sup> The second call for projects, called IDEAS, which was for senior researchers, will fund 105 projects in the next three years. Compared to PROMIS, the situation is slightly better: there are 24 projects related to social sciences and humanities, compared to 39 projects from natural sciences, 23 from technical and engineering and 19 from (bio)medical sciences.<sup>11</sup>

The Faculty of Philology, which is one of the most prominent higher-education institutions in the Republic of Serbia, is both a teaching and a research institution. It is part of the University of Belgrade, the oldest and the most prestigious university in Serbia. Although the Faculty has been independent only since 1960, research in disciplines such as literature, philology, languages (Latin, French, German, etc.) date back to 19<sup>th</sup> century and the Lyceum.<sup>12</sup> As of today, the Faculty of Philology is the largest place for studying philological

<sup>8</sup> In Serbia, most faculties are both teaching and research institutions. There are also institutes which serve solely for research purposes.

<sup>9</sup> The Science Fund of the Republic of Serbia's website: <http://fondzanauku.gov.rs/?lang=en>

<sup>10</sup> Data available from: *ПРОМИС – коначна ранг листа пројеката одобрених за финансирање*, 2020.

<sup>11</sup> Data available from: *Program IDEAS: 105 projects supported for funding*, n.d.

<sup>12</sup> For more about the Faculty of Philology, see the Faculty's webpage: *About the Faculty*, n.d.

sciences in Serbia, with 16 departments, 9 centres and institutes, and 28 languages. It offers both undergraduate and graduate study programmes. There are four accredited programmes at the undergraduate level: Serbian Language and Literature; Serbian Literature and Language; Serbian Literature and Language with Comparative Literature; and Language, Literature, Culture. The last one incorporates languages as well as Comparative Literature and Literary Theory, General Linguistics, and Library and Information Science.

The Faculty offers a total of 1,413 places. In 2021, 1,175 students enrolled at the Faculty, which is around 30 more than previous years, but far less than at the beginning of the millennia, when the faculty had 2,400 new students per year (Jokić-Stamenković, 2021). Demographic factors, such as fertility rate and increased migration, have certainly contributed to the lower numbers; however, the data also shows that there is a decline in interest only in certain profiles, mainly Serbian language- and literature-related departments and comparative literature.

All students that want to enrol in the Language, Literature, Culture programme are ranked together according to their entrance exam results, and they then choose a department according to their ranking (the first student on the list chooses first etc.). In 2021, Chinese studies were the most popular profile, followed by Scandinavian studies and other Oriental languages like Japanese and Arabic. The high interest in Chinese language, literature and culture can be explained by the growing number of investors from China, and Serbia's close relationship with the Chinese government in recent years. The increased demand for Chinese translators assures students that they will be able to find a job soon after graduation. Given the relatively small number of Chinese graduates per year<sup>13</sup> in comparison to the demand, translators can hope to keep their salaries high. Although this programme contains literature and culture as equally important parts of education, it is safe to assume that students mainly study Chinese (or some other language, culture, literature programme) because of the market demand. However, trends in foreign policy, politics, and in the market are constantly changing. It cannot be guaranteed that a specific profession will be popular in a year, two years, or a decade. Choosing a degree solely because it is popular at a given time will not overcome concerns about the instability of the market. Therefore, it remains to be seen what subjects will become more or less popular in the next years.

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<sup>13</sup> There are currently 45 places per year, but usually less students graduate.

In contrast, the departments of Serbian Language and Literature, Serbian Literature and Language, Serbian Literature and Language with Comparative Literature, and Comparative Literature have been seeing a massive drop in the number of students for years (Crnjanski Spasojević, 2021).<sup>14</sup> In the first enrolment cycle, less than one third of all available places were filled. That means that, after the first enrolment cycle, even state scholarship places were available. It is also worth mentioning that students who passed the entrance exam performed extremely poorly. Since there was no predetermined entrance exam threshold, even students with zero points could also enrol. These students also performed poorly in their primary and secondary education (see also Ilić, 2021).

Why do students not opt for the Serbian language and literature departments or comparative literature? Firstly, it has traditionally been assumed that these disciplines produce *pure non-instrumental knowledge* that does not give students any practical skills, thereby making their career path largely determined. This conservative stance concerning students' employment after graduation has persisted until today. Students in Serbian-related departments usually hope for academic and primary or secondary school positions. Some of them become editors or writers, but teaching positions have always been a somewhat 'safe' job after graduation. However, in 2013, the Serbian government imposed an employment restriction in the public sector. In terms of public education, this meant that only retired professors could be replaced, and otherwise there was no capacity for the employment of new personnel. Only a small percentage of students could find a job in education, while others had to use the skills they obtained at university somewhere else. Comparative literature, which also cannot lure enough students to fill its quota, is probably in an even worse position. It is a part of the Language, Literature and Culture programme. Students who choose this department cannot teach in schools, like those who graduate Serbian-related departments. Sometimes they find jobs as language teachers, but they usually cannot compete with their colleagues who have degrees in specific languages. Therefore, departments should put an emphasis on competences in order to enable students to use their skills in various new job roles. If students cannot use their knowledge in the real world, this means that the curriculum has to change, and that teaching staff should reconsider the goals of the education they provide.

<sup>14</sup> The drop is also evident in other philology faculties in Serbia.

However, when it comes to other possible career paths for students who graduate in native language and literature, the potential for humanities graduates to find jobs, especially ones that are related to culture, is lower than in developed countries. As Terry Eagleton has observed, “[i]t is true that culture transcends material need, and to exceed strict necessity in this way, as *King Lear* recognises, is of our nature. Yet it is material conditions which determine how far this may be possible” (Eagleton, 2016, p. 110). Given the low average salaries and the fact that Serbian society has some of the highest inequalities in Europe,<sup>15</sup> it can be assumed that only a small percentage of people in Serbia have the material resources and time to engage in cultural activities. This indirectly hinders humanities graduates’ prospects for employment.

On the other hand, the Faculty of Philology still educates future primary and high school teachers of the Serbian language, which is one of the most important subjects. In these classes, students (should) develop critical thinking and learn how to write essays, make valid arguments, and participate in civic life. If newly enrolled students in Serbian-related departments did not perform well in their previous stages of education, does this mean that the entry criteria should be lowered or that less students will graduate from these departments? A decline in academic rigour or the quality of students that enrol in Serbian-related departments will further damage the primary and secondary educational system, which is already negatively affected by dissatisfaction due to low salaries and bad management.

In 2020, the Faculty of Philology had an internal crisis regarding its administration, which even resulted in protests by personnel and students (“Nastavnici i saradnici Filološkog fakulteta najavili protestnu šetnju za 29. septembar”, 2020). After months of uncertainty, the Faculty finally got a new administration in February 2021 (V. A., 2021). Recognizing the problem of the Faculty’s damaged reputation, the declining interest in philological studies, and general problems in the humanities and the need for better organization, the new administration employed a marketing strategy and immediately started a campaign to promote the Faculty. They created an Instagram account<sup>16</sup> in order to appeal to younger generations. Posts on social media and the Faculty’s website became more organized and up-to-date. It is also evident on the website that the new administration wants to be more trans-

<sup>15</sup> According to the SILC data from 2016. See more at: Government of the Republic of Serbia, 2018. For more about results’ interpretation and methodology see Arandarenko et al., 2017.

<sup>16</sup> [https://www.instagram.com/filoski\\_fakultet\\_bg/](https://www.instagram.com/filoski_fakultet_bg/)

parent about the Faculty's endeavours and activities. During the entrance exam in July 2021, the Faculty's promotion team and young researchers joined forces to improve prospective students' experiences. They provided students with useful information, helped them to find classrooms, and assisted during registration. In order to acquaint students with the Faculty's programs, teaching staff filmed short videos in which they gave short introductions to their research disciplines.<sup>17</sup> The new Faculty brochure about the departments also looks more promising. For example, in the career section, as well as the *traditional* career paths there are also jobs like web content creators, (digital) marketing experts, copywriters or content writers (Филолошки факултет Универзитета у Београду, n.d.).

However, given the broader challenges that the humanities and society face, all the aforementioned strategies, although welcomed, are still not enough for fundamental changes to be carried out in philological education. The Faculty might need some advertising in order to rebuild its reputation, but it should not succumb to the neoliberal vision of higher education because it undermines the core values of humanistic research. While it is important to acquaint philological students with various possible career paths, it is even more crucial to remind them what the essence of philological research is.

During the pandemic in Serbia, citizens showed distrust in institutions and the government's decisions; this culminated in July 2020, when people protested against the planned curfew. Another manifestation of distrust is people's reluctance to get vaccinated.<sup>18</sup> In a time of crisis, people need tools to filter information and to make the right decisions. They get these tools primarily through education, especially in native language and literature classes. Also, people can turn to literature in order to expand their imagination and develop empathy and understanding for others. Many works of literature describe diseases, pandemics, and people's possible strategies for coping with crisis. Therefore, the true value of the research at the Faculty of Philology lies in the development of critical thinking, close reading, making logical arguments, understanding cultures, and developing empathy. Furthermore, teaching all the aforementioned to younger generations is a key prerequisite for a democratic and a more equal society. What it takes for an essential change and whether the new administration has the resources and support to turn the tide still remains to be seen.

<sup>17</sup> Available at Faculty's YouTube channel: Filološki fakultet Univerziteta u Beogradu, n.d.

<sup>18</sup> According to data, only 47.47% of Serbian citizens are fully vaccinated, although Serbia provided enough vaccines (*Our world in data*, n.d.).

## Conclusion

Higher education and the humanities have gone through dramatic changes in the last few decades. These changes reflect the values of the new culture that is focused on the economy and financial progress. The economic crisis in 2008 was seen at first as a turning point and the potential decline of such a culture. However, market-oriented society persisted and even worsened conditions in higher education and hindered free research. There is a great paradox here. As Eagleton says:

Ironically, the very forces which make for prosperity also help to refine our sensibilities, and thus make us more vigilant to the iniquities such prosperity brings in its wake. Industrial capitalist society produces the wealth to create such institutions as art galleries, universities and publishing houses, which can then take that same society to task for its greed and philistinism. In this sense, it is the role of culture to bite the hand that feeds it. (Eagleton, 2016, p. 18)

Many authors and teachers believe that it is in the nature of culture and the humanities to be subversive or, more precisely, to be critical of the existing power relations in society. In other words, everyone involved with humanities should be capable of identifying, understanding, interpreting, and, when needed, criticising problems in society. However, it seems that this role is forgotten or marginalized, even though society is more prosperous than ever. The pandemic crisis that left the whole world in awe and unprepared might be a chance to question whether this world is a world we want to live in. If not, the humanities can help us to imagine a new one.

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## Nauki humanistyczne na rozdrożu – wyzwania i perspektywy w świecie po pandemii COVID-19

Szeroko zakrojone zmiany społeczne i polityczne pod koniec XX wieku przekształciły szkolnictwo wyższe, a co za tym idzie, badania i pozycję nauk humanistycznych na uniwersytetach na całym świecie. W niniejszym artykule analizie poddany został szeroko dyskutowany kryzys w humanistyce oraz postawiono pytania o jego przebieg w świetle globalnej pandemii COVID-19. Autorka przekonuje, że pandemia COVID-19 może być okazją do refleksji prowadzącej do zmian w szkolnictwie wyższym, które mają na celu ożywienie badań humanistycznych, dostarczających ludziom narzędzi, takich jak krytyczne myślenie, będące kluczowym w czasach kryzysu (np. pandemii). Analizie poddany został przykład Wydziału Filologicznego Uniwersytetu w Belgradzie, najwybitniejszego miejsca badań nad językiem, kulturą i literaturą w Serbii. Wybór ten został podyktowany faktem, iż jest to instytucja, która stoi przed wieloma wyzwaniami, przede wszystkim związanymi ze spadkiem liczby zapisów na niektóre kierunki. Na koniec analizuję strategie tego Wydziału w zakresie radzenia sobie zarówno z problemami wewnętrznymi, jak i zewnętrznymi oraz ożywienia zainteresowania przyszłych studentów studiami filologicznymi.

**Słowa kluczowe:** humanistyka, kryzys, pandemia COVID-19, szkolnictwo wyższe, Serbia, Wydział Filologiczny Uniwersytetu w Belgradzie

## **The humanities at a crossroads: Challenges and prospects in the (post-)COVID-19 world**

The widespread social and political changes at the end of the 20<sup>th</sup> century influenced and reshaped higher education and, consequently, research in and the position of the humanities at universities around the world. This paper examines the much-debated *crisis* in the humanities and poses questions on its course in the light of the global COVID-19 pandemic. It argues that the COVID-19 pandemic might be an opportunity for reflections that may lead to changes in higher education that aim to revive humanistic research, which provides people with tools such as critical thinking, which has proved to be crucial in times of crisis, like pandemics. We consider the example of the Faculty of Philology at the University of Belgrade, the most prominent place for language, culture and literature research in Serbia, as this is an institution that faces many challenges, primarily a decline in enrolment in certain programmes. Finally, we analyse this Faculty's strategies to cope with both internal and external problems and to revitalize the interest of prospective students in philological studies.

**Keywords:** humanities, crisis, COVID-19 pandemic, higher education, Serbia, Faculty of Philology at the University of Belgrade

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