

# Council to restore value of ‘misunderstood’ humanities

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The Council for the Development of Social Science Research in Africa (CODESRIA) has initiated a three-year programme to boost the place of the humanities in African universities and re-assert the place of the social sciences in the continent’s development against a backdrop of policies that it claims undervalue the humanities and social sciences and even question their relevance.

With the support of the Andrew W Mellon Foundation, the council is undertaking a range of activities under a programme called “Supporting innovations in the humanities in African universities” to revitalise and re-energise the teaching and research of the humanities in African higher education institutions.

Ibrahim Oanda, head of training, grants and fellowships at CODESRIA, told *University World News* that “innovation” involved a broadening of the scope of the humanities on the continent beyond traditional academic disciplines, to encompass emerging areas such as the digital and public humanities.

The council argues in a project summary document that little has been done to revise content in the traditional humanities to accommodate emerging fields of study.

“There is therefore need for interventions to explore new theories and methods on which to ground relevant knowledge production in the humanities on the continent, and possibly suggest ways of broadening the scope of the humanities in the continent’s universities, beyond the traditional academic disciplines,” the council said in its project summary.

## Threats to social sciences and humanities

In documents supporting the revitalisation programme, the council argues that the humanities and social sciences in Africa have come under pressure in recent years, and faced threats from different spheres that “misunderstood” the place of the disciplines in the transformation of the continent.

“The objective of the project is to contribute to quality knowledge production in the humanities in African universities by implementing interventions that support a re-invigoration of cultures of quality teaching, research and mentoring,” said part of the programme summary prepared by Oanda.

To this end, four projects and activities are being initiated in 2020, including an advanced fellowship project that will offer support to schools and faculties of social sciences and humanities as well as doctoral schools.

The programme includes conferences for deans of humanities and social sciences that will help to rebuild scholarly communities through academic seminars, writing and publications workshops and activities targeting doctoral supervisors as agents in the “recreation of the culture of academic excellence” in teaching and research.

“The strategy here will be to support activities that contribute towards reviving infrastructures for teaching and researching the humanities, including support for faculty seminars and workshops and supporting faculty-based publication and dissemination outlets,” the council statement says.

In addition, an advanced fellowship initiative will support senior academics seeking to map out “new terrains” in the study of the humanities. A total of 10 fellowships have been lined up for the first year of the project.

“This could include a focus on issues of theory, methodology and conceptual framing or propose new ways of broadening the scope of the humanities on the continent beyond the traditional academic disciplines, and show how the traditional humanities’ disciplines would

accommodate or be accommodated by the emerging areas of study,” according to one of the CODESRIA calls for applications issued in December.

### **Humanities Institute**

A **Humanities Institute** will be convened each year for the duration of the project starting in 2020 in Gaborone, Botswana. It will mentor career academics who completed their doctorates in the last five years.

According to CODESRIA documents relating to the programme, while the humanities constitute an important component of higher education, “decades of underfunding have undermined the quality of teaching, research and subsequent quality of knowledge produced”.

“Even as recommendations are being made by policy-makers for the integration of the humanities with science, technology, engineering and mathematics (STEM) disciplines, advance interventions ought to be made across the continent to improve the quality of teaching.”

The council identifies challenges that have undermined the growth of teaching and research in the humanities in African universities, to include advancement of policies that undervalue humanities and “continued questioning of the relevance of knowledge” in the humanities and social sciences.

The council faults authorities and policy-makers who argue that the humanities are not important to Africa’s development and who blame the humanities for aggravating the problem of graduate unemployment, accusing universities of over-enrolling students in the disciplines.