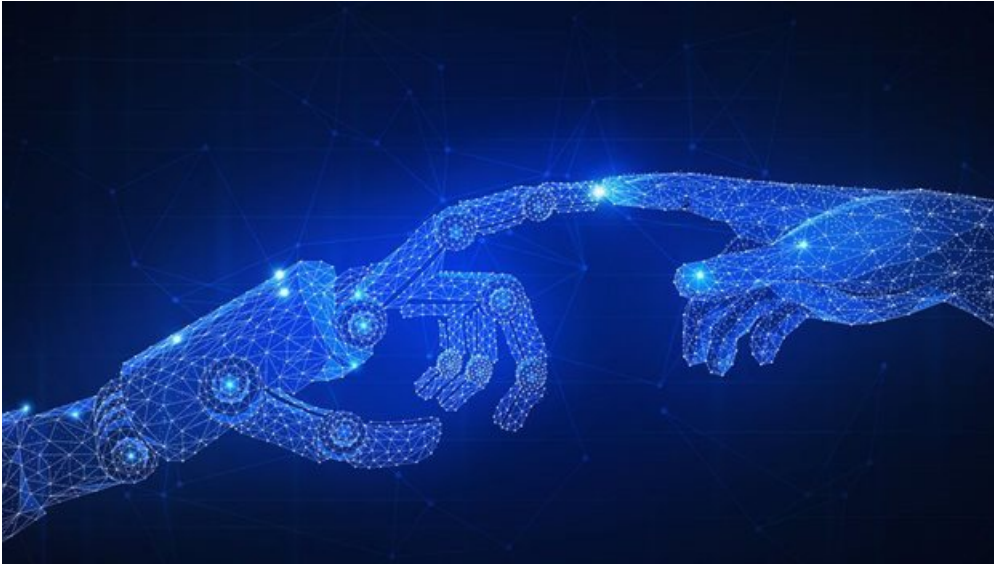# Humanities education needs an upgrade to make the most of 4IR

As pure sciences and information technology alone are not able to equip students for the fourth industrial revolution, universities must ensure that students are equipped with human and social sciences perspectives to embrace the changes that this epoch brings with it for maximum human benefit.

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This was one of the main messages conveyed by speakers at the Africa Universities Forum 2019: Universities Powering Africa's Renaissance for the Fourth Industrial Revolution, held in Johannesburg recently.

Humanities subjects and the arts give students the critical thinking, debating and problem-solving skills needed to explore the complex human-to-robotic relations that we are already experiencing in the fourth industrial revolution.

Adopting a new approach

Various academics debated whether universities should be adopting a stronger interdisciplinary approach to course delivery to prepare students for what lies ahead, and whether, at a time when machines are rapidly learning, how can arts and humanities enable us to better understand the use and impact of emerging technologies.

Participating in a panel discussion at the forum, Dr Nhlanhla Thwala, Academic Director at Pearson Institute of Higher

Education, argued that humanities can be looked at as the study of lived human experience.

"Human beings live and interact with various phenomena and form reactions. Technology is just one of those phenomena that we have to deal with and have been dealing with during each of the preceding industrial revolutions," he said.

"The issue is very simple – have Africans extracted value from all the previous industrial revolutions? The answer is, yes."

However, Thwala noted that one of the biggest shortcomings in the field of arts and humanities is that the study of its elements has traditionally been retrospective and focused on esoteric concerns of academics and specialists in the respective fields.

"We study humanities, we see what society has created, but we struggle to see what lies ahead. It's difficult, because our methods are empirical. We look at the past and we struggle with projecting what is going to happen.

"I haven't seen a single study in humanities that predicted what was going to happen in the next epoch. Things evolve and we wake up after the fact and then we study them. That is one of the major problems in academy," Thwala pointed out.

Curriuclum restructuring for 4IR

In terms of restructuring the curriculum to prepare students for the future, Thwala stated that there is the issue of practically defining what is meant by the fourth industrial revolution in relation to humanities.

"How are we going to – without knowing in depth what the fourth industrial revolution means – structure the curriculum in such a way that we can impart that knowledge to students?" he asked.

"Maybe it is a question of control. Academics have always developed the curriculum knowing what the learning outcomes should be. Maybe the time has come for us to understand that in this case, within the humanities at least, we need to collaborate with other faculties and even students, who often know more about these technologies than we do in curriculum development."

However, Thwala was adamant that humanities can benefit from advances in technology, citing examples such as the movie making industry, as well as for students who study new media, where mass communication now makes it easier to reach people across the globe.

"One area that has beaten us to this is business – rushing ahead and exploiting these benefits. Humanities is behind the curve. We are studying information technology post facto and trying to understand what we should be doing after the fact," he said.

"We need to wake up to the fact that somewhere along the line we'll need to be in front of technological developments, not behind them. That may require us to study the field, as opposed to sitting on the humanities side only as commentators."

Are you still relevant?

Thwala pointed out that it is important for universities to ask themselves whether they are still relevant in two important ways.

First, there is relevance in terms of the academic offerings as noted above the humanities. Secondly, there is relevance in terms of reaching the widest possible students who need university education. Africa's young population is already showing signs of unprecedented demand for university education that existing universities and modes of teaching learning delivery cannot fulfil.

The question this raises is this: Can we solve the problem by more bricks and mortar university infrastructure? Or can we use emerging technologies in education to address the problem while mitigating the already known drawbacks of distance

and virtual learning?

"These are some of the questions that these emerging technologies are asking us to address: can we change our practice? Can we look at the way we approach education and ask ourselves are we still relevant?"