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Digital Humanities as a Cross-Sector and Cross-Discipline Initiative

Prospects in the Linnaeus University Region

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Abstract—**This position paper presents and analyses the cross-sector and cross-disciplinary Digital Humanities Initiative at Linnaeus University along the axes of its strengths, weaknesses, opportunities and threats. Our long-term vision is to create a leading education in this field and to establish a leading research regional centre that combines in novel ways already existing expertise from different departments and faculties working in close collaboration and co-creation with people and different organizations (both public and private sector) from the surrounding society.**

Keywords—Digital Humanities; cross-sector; cross-disciplinary

I. INTRODUCTION

The particular exploration of new ways of interactions between society and Information Communication Technologies (ICT) with a focus on the Humanities has the potential to become a key success factor for the values and competitiveness of the entire region surrounding Linnaeus University (LNU), having in mind recent EU and Swedish political discussions in the field of Digital Humanities [1, 2]. Digital Humanities (DH) is a diverse and still emerging field that lies at the intersection of ICT and Humanities, which is being continually formulated by scholars and practitioners in a range of disciplines [3, 4].

The main goals of this new initiative (launched in February 2016) at the first phase (12-15 months) are twofold; first, to establish the foundations for the creation of a DH educational program and second, to carry out research and create an innovation centre at the wider region surrounding LNU, encompassing east southern Sweden. At the foundation of this first phase there are ten pilot projects grouped around three major areas: 1) *Digital story telling / E-entertainment*; 2) *Interactive visualization / Social network analysis;* and, 3) *Data curation.* The long-term vision is to create a leading education, development and research regional centre that combines in novel ways already existing expertise from different LNU departments and faculties working in close collaboration and co-creation with people and different organizations (both public and private sector) from the surrounding society.

This position paper discusses the cross-sector and cross-disciplinary DH Initiative unique in the Linnaeus region along the axes of its strengths, weaknesses, opportunities and threats (SWOT). While this approach may not be the typical framework for a short position paper, considering the character and early stages of the Initiative, it is considered the most appropriate one having in mind the nature of these efforts.

II. STRENGTHS

LNU's work can be characterized by novel activities and efforts when it comes to teaching and research in the field of DH. The following are examples of current areas of activities: text-analytic techniques, categorization, data mining; Social Network Analysis (SNA) and bibliometrics; metadata and tagging; Geographic Information Systems (GIS); multimedia and interactive games; visualisation; media; Big Data. LNU's Centre for Learning and Knowledge Technologies (http://www.celekt.info) established in 2004 has been particularly active in multi-disciplinary research and innovation in collaboration with the private and public sector, with many projects related to DH. IEC (http://iec2020.se) is an infrastructure comprising over 200 companies, which serves as a direct link with the private sector that in co-creation with LNU through various projects addresses societal challenges.

One of our major strengths lies in re-combining already existing expertise and resources encompassing: 1) various disciplines at LNU, and 2) the wider community through input from related public and private sectors. LNU aims to act as a strong driving force in the region and boasts well-established, close collaborations with the surrounding business sphere and the community at large. Point (1) above which serves for uniting and consolidating already existing expertise in order to create new constellations for collaboration leading to new knowledge and products (expertise, education, research, public and commercial services relevant for the region, such as a cultural tourism industry perspective), and (2) strong cross-sector collaboration, hold the potential to achieve the goals described in the introduction.

Recently, LNU has become the first Swedish university (and the second Nordic country) to join DARIAH-EU (http://dariah.eu), as a collaborative partner. DARIAH-EU is

Europe's largest initiative on DH, comprising over 300 researchers in 18 countries, thereby opening up opportunities for international collaboration and projects. Currently, the DH Initiative at LNU includes 13 departments from 4 out of 5 faculties and the participants come, apart from LNU, from the public and private sector, and other (inter)national universities. All this reflects the relevance and recognition of the Initiative; the network has grown from 32 in February to 81 in August.

A combination of cross-disciplinary, cross-sector and international aspects would provide a solid ground to build a rather unique international distance Master-level programme. In contrast, other DH initiatives in Nordic countries seem to be less international, do not include external sectors to a large degree and focus on fewer major disciplines[1].

III. WEAKNESSES

In relation to weaknesses, these seem to be generally external factors, such as the question of the job market, in Sweden as well as abroad considering the international distance Master programme in DH. Related to this, there are a relatively low number of students who pursue carriers in humanities at the Master level; in Sweden, for most jobs in humanities employers tend to accept Bachelor-level degrees. Further, LNU is a young university and one question is whether it can attract that many students for a return on investment. Also, given the fact that DH as a field is still in its infancy, it is quite difficult to get funding and grants to carry out long-term research that sustain our efforts over time.

IV. OPPORTUNITIES

The opportunities based on the foundation of widely cross-disciplinary and cross-sector collaborations are promising. When it comes to education, graduate programmes could be developed that are unique on the market in their cross-disciplinarity to address existing challenges at participating public and private sector partners, for example via students' project work. In addition, an attractive mixture of compulsory and facultative courses in the international distance mode would attract a larger number of graduate international students, which are both in line with LNU's strategy for the future. Furthermore, involving non-academic institutions would ensue in a direct societal influence. This would be achieved through, for example, educating for skills that are missing on the market, like digital skills for the humanities oriented staff (e.g., digital story telling, digital interfaces for different groups of end users) and cultural history knowledge for technology oriented staff, as well as organizing students' theses work on actual projects that need addressing in the non-academic sector. Educational modules for working professionals could also be organized, to address the needs of the public and private sector in specific niches.

Building on the international staff profile and their connections, currently from 20 universities and leading DH centres in 12 countries on 3 continents (e.g., Australian Centre for Indigenous History at Australian National University, University of Umeå's HumLab), and 10 public and private

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[1] See https://mymoodle.lnu.se/mod/page/view.php?id=1155542

sector partners (e.g., the Library of Congress) would result in wider collaboration with external academic institutions which would further add to the expertise pool and ensue in even larger innovation, research and education possibilities and may eventually lead to an even larger return on investment. Not the least, other partnerships, such as the recently discussed formation of an iSchool (http://ischools.org), may also ensue.

It is envisioned that, based on the planned achievements, an important value for the general public could be a (re)-affirmation of the value of humanities in particular, and academic practices in general. Addressing future societal challenges would be eventually possible by highly skilled professionals whose education has been markedly enhanced by practice-informed education and joint, cross-sector innovation, making this initiative more or less unique.

V. THREATS

Not the least, epistemological, conceptual and terminological differences in approaches by the different disciplines and sectors may present further challenges and therefore may require additional resources to reach an understanding. The participants of this initiative have expressed a wide variety of short- and long-term values for them and activities that they conduct. While they all belong to DH, the challenge to address is to find the overlap which is the core of the field, and how to combine the different "lego" pieces for addressing societal and research challenges in a more comprehensive and systematic approach. We will need to identify distinctive advantages for attracting (inter)national students to a new and novel programme at LNU. One way to address this may be to focus on the combination of the best contributions of all combined partners to create the best output.

While there is a strong collaborative spirit across the whole of LNU, there will certainly be administrative issues with cross-faculty and cross-university collaboration as the current working structures are based on individual units. This may be in particularly challenging in terms of cross-university education programmes. Related to this, agreements will need to be reached as to with what and how each department and staff member would contribute.

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