

How the Humanities Taught Me to Stay

Six years ago, my parents offered me what many families in Central Asia consider the safest path to a successful future: leave.

“You should learn to live and work abroad,” they told me. “Life is better there.”

Their advice was understandable. Across the region, migration is often treated not as a choice but as a strategy for survival. For decades, young people have left for Russia, South Korea, Europe, Turkey, Canada, and the United States in search of opportunities unavailable at home. In many communities, success is measured not by what one builds locally, but by how far one manages to go. At eighteen, I almost accepted that logic. Instead, I became curious about it.

That curiosity—more than any examination, application, or admission letter—marked the beginning of my journey into higher education. Before entering university, I assumed education was primarily about acquiring skills. The humanities challenged that assumption. Through history, literature, philosophy, and social thought, I encountered a different understanding of education: not simply as preparation for employment, but as a way of interpreting society and one's place within it. The humanities did not provide answers. They changed the questions I asked. Why do some regions experience constant migration while others attract talent? Why do certain communities imagine their future elsewhere? Why do people accept social conditions that they simultaneously criticize? Most importantly, what responsibilities accompany education?

These questions transformed how I viewed both my country and myself. Growing up, I often heard discussions about unemployment, corruption, weak infrastructure, educational inequality, and demographic pressure. These issues were usually presented as isolated problems. Yet the humanities taught me to see connections. History revealed how institutions shape opportunities across generations. Sociology demonstrated how inequalities become normalized. Philosophy introduced the idea that individual choices are inseparable from ethical responsibility.

Gradually, I stopped seeing migration merely as an economic phenomenon. I began to see it as a question of imagination. People leave not only because opportunities are scarce. They leave because they struggle to imagine meaningful futures where they are. This realization profoundly influenced my entry into higher education. Rather than viewing university as an exit route, I began to see it as a space for understanding systems and imagining alternatives. That

perspective eventually led me to an unexpected decision. Instead of preparing exclusively for my own future, I became involved in building educational opportunities for others. Together with colleagues and supporters, I helped establish a school in a geographically remote region of Uzbekistan. Looking back, I realize that this was not simply an educational project. It was an attempt to translate ideas learned through the humanities into institutional practice. The school emerged from a simple conviction: if narratives shape futures, then education can reshape narratives. This conviction influenced every aspect of the model we developed. Academic achievement remained important, but it was never the sole objective. We wanted students to become adaptable thinkers capable of navigating a rapidly changing world. We introduced foreign languages at an early age, emphasized critical thinking, encouraged civic participation through student government, and created spaces for debate, reading, and environmental initiatives. What mattered was not merely what students learned but how they learned to understand themselves and their communities. In many ways, the project became an extension of my higher education experience. Universities often emphasize specialization. The humanities repeatedly reminded me that specialization alone is insufficient. Artificial intelligence, technological disruption, political polarization, and global migration are not merely technical challenges. They are human challenges requiring ethical judgment, historical awareness, and cultural understanding.

The more responsibilities I assumed, the more valuable the humanities became. History taught me humility. It revealed that many contemporary challenges are older than they appear. Philosophy taught me to tolerate uncertainty. Important decisions rarely arrive with guarantees. Literature strengthened empathy. It allowed me to see individuals not as statistics but as lives shaped by circumstance and aspiration. Sociology encouraged me to question assumptions that often pass unnoticed as common sense. Together, these disciplines fundamentally shaped how I approached leadership. They encouraged me to think less about authority and more about responsibility.

By 2025, the educational model had expanded to multiple campuses and served hundreds of students. While these outcomes matter, they are not what I consider the most important result. The most important result is that I learned education itself is a form of agency. For many years, I assumed change depended on favorable conditions: stronger economies, better policies, larger investments, or more stable political environments. The humanities challenged that assumption as well. They showed me that social transformation often begins when individuals reinterpret what they believe is possible.

In this sense, the humanities influenced both my entry into higher education and my experience within it. They provided intellectual tools for understanding complex realities, but they also shaped my moral imagination. They taught me that education is not merely about advancement. It is about responsibility toward the communities that made that advancement possible. Today, discussions about higher education often focus on employability, competitiveness, and technological skills. These concerns are important. Yet my experience has convinced me that universities serve another purpose that is equally essential. They help us learn how to think about human beings.

Without the humanities, we may know how to solve problems. We may not know which problems are worth solving.

Without the humanities, we may become efficient. We may not become wise.

And without the humanities, I might have accepted the assumption that leaving was the only rational choice. Instead, they taught me to ask a different question:

What if education is not only a pathway out, but also a reason to stay? That question changed the direction of my life. And it continues to shape the future I am trying to build.