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The decline of the humanities and social sciences in South Africa

Two reports on the humanities and social sciences in South Africa have appeared within a month of each other, pointing to an increasing awareness of a sector of higher education that has declined – at least in terms of student enrolment – since the advent of our democracy in 1994. What can be done to arrest this decline?

The Academy of Science of South Africa (ASSAf)'s report (<http://www.assaf.org.za/wp-content/uploads/2011/08/25-July-Final.pdf>) documents that the number of graduates with first degrees in humanities declined by an average of 1% per annum between 1996 and 2008. During the same period, total graduate numbers increased by an average of 3% per annum, including a 5% increase in the number of graduates in science and technology, 11% in business and management, and 2% in education. The Charter for the Humanities and Social Sciences Report (<http://www.charterforhumanities.co.za/final-charter-report-released>), commissioned by the Minister of Higher Education and Training, Dr Blade Nzimande, takes as its starting point his observation that, while government policy has rightly placed emphasis on 'critical areas of skills shortage such as engineering, technology, the physical sciences and certain areas of business studies such as accounting', there is a danger that 'too singular a focus on certain areas will lead to a neglect of other equally important areas'.

The two reports differ in the research methodologies they bring to bear on their common range of questions, and consequently provide some different answers to these questions: the ASSAf report employs an empirical mode of enquiry, whereas the charter report is qualitative, based on interviews of 1400 people. While opinion-based advice has the advantage of demonstrating the subjective concerns and passions of its constituent voices, it proves difficult to assess the recommendations that emerge from collective and consensual reports. How truly consensual is the opinion represented by the survey: can the sample of 1400 voices be taken as representative of the sector as a whole and yield a democratic mandate for substantial systemic changes? No methodological reflection is supplied here, but it seems unlikely that there would have been consensus even in the voices selected. And particularly in the midst of a recession, the grandiose schemes it proposes leave one with a sense of its authors being in cloud cuckoo land.

But there is common ground between the reports: both echo concerns about the decline of the humanities and social sciences in terms of pedagogy, public legitimation and research. In terms of legitimation, the ASSAf report recommends renaming the Academy, changing its constitution so that 50% of its council would be humanities appointments, and establishing a sister premier academy journal to the *South African Journal of Science*. The first two recommendations should have immediate benefits and would cost nothing. The third would be expensive: the same aim might well be achieved by affording greater coverage to the humanities within the journal – a stated objective of the current editorial team over the past three years. In terms of pedagogy, the report offers few new insights to our well-documented national crisis, but does some special pleading for affording the arts, history and languages their due significance in the school curriculum.

In terms of research, it is clear that the humanities are not well served by the restrictive funding template currently offered by the National Research Foundation (NRF). This is not news to natural scientists, whose interests have been similarly poorly served by the same body over the past 5 years. But it is less clear that returning the foundation's mandate to fund university research in humanities and social sciences to the Human Sciences Research Council would improve the situation (for there is little point in simply creating additional administrative structures). Instead, bursaries should be earmarked to allow full-time graduate study for good candidates in the humanities and social sciences; and funds should be ring-fenced to support research in critical areas such as history, African languages and the creative performing arts. Half of the country's doctoral graduates are in the humanities and social sciences (including education) and, unlike at undergraduate level, this proportion has declined only marginally within the past decade. But on average they take longer to complete their degrees, as far fewer are full-time students.

Minister of Science and Technology Naledi Pandor has already been pre-emptive in reacting to this situation: the current round of applications for research chairs, for example, places an emphasis on appointments in humanities and social sciences. It is also probably no coincidence that the new board of the NRF comprises equal numbers of natural and social scientists. Its new chair, microbiologist Khotso Mokhele, has the task of guiding the reform of the foundation so that it supports research judiciously in both the natural sciences and the humanities. One way to start might be to appoint a humanities or social science researcher as its next president.