

# The Humanities and Social Sciences in SA: Crisis or cause for concern?

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The publication of two high-level reports on the state of the Humanities in South Africa in recent months<sup>1,2</sup> is in itself a historic event. If scholars in the Humanities and Social Sciences (HSS) had been concerned about the lack of appreciation and recognition by the government and senior decision-makers in the science system for their fields and disciplines, just the fact that these reports have been commissioned and published should go some way to allaying any fears of their imminent 'demise'. But of course the rationale behind these two studies is to be found in more serious concerns by scholars in these fields: that there are systematic biases in the national science and higher education system which explicitly (and sometimes not so explicitly) constrain, weaken and disadvantage the HSS. These concerns relate to matters of funding, publication support, expenditure on R&D, reward systems and many other key components of these systems.

Although the two studies which led to the reports were very different, they did depart from a very similar set of assumptions which are captured in phrases such as the 'crisis of the humanities'<sup>1</sup>, the 'decline of the humanities'<sup>1</sup> and even the 'demise of the humanities'<sup>1</sup>. Even a reader – such as myself – who is sympathetic to the role and value of the humanities in society, will ask three related questions. Firstly, have these studies made a convincing case for any strong claims about the 'dire' state of the HSS in South Africa? Secondly, where evidence is put forward regarding the decline in funding and support for the HSS, does this evidence clearly show that the HSS are more 'disadvantaged' than other fields of scholarship? Thirdly, assuming that the previous two are answered in the affirmative, are the recommendations and proposals contained in these studies themselves evidence-based and realistic?

Before I address each of these questions it is worth emphasising that the two reports differ in a number of crucial aspects. The Academy of Science of South Africa (ASSAf) report<sup>1</sup> is a typical consensus study report which followed a standard methodology to accumulate a sufficient base of evidence, and concluded with a limited number of recommendations. The findings and recommendations are based both on previous and empirical studies as well studies commissioned specifically for the report. This approach does not necessarily mean that there are not some questions about the evidence presented, but on the whole the ASSAf study certainly comes across as a systematically researched study with the appropriate evidence presented in the report. The charter document, on the other hand, presents very little systematic evidence in support of the claims that it makes. Although one does not necessarily evaluate such documents ('charters') with the same rigorous criteria as a standard research study, there are many methodological flaws and inferential gaps in the study. There are numerous cases where very strong conclusions are based on anecdotal evidence. This observation is surprising as its methodology comprised interviews with a wide range of persons, as well as secondary analysis of available documents. But the problem is that it is impossible for the reader, in the absence of a systematic presentation of such primary evidence, to assess the veracity of many contentious claims.

## Crisis or cause for concern?

Any attempt to make a special case for the HSS in a country where these fields have a long and proud tradition, are properly institutionalised within the national science system, and contribute significantly to national knowledge production, has to be careful about the rhetoric it employs. The ASSAf study is more articulate in this respect and recognises the strengths of the HSS in South Africa, that is, that the HSS constitute 38% of total research output annually, that they produce more than 40% of all doctorates annually, that we are the only science system on the continent where two national research facilities (the Human Sciences Research Council and Africa Institute) are supported through parliamentary grants, and where the majority of HSS graduates do not struggle to find employment. This recognition is not to say that there are not also clear instances where the HSS are often on the receiving end of systemic (if not intentional) biases such as the representation of HSS scholars on national bodies, the poor recognition of book publications (until now) in the Department of Higher Education and Training (DHET) funding

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framework and the distribution of centres of excellence and National Research Foundation (NRF) chairs. But these are very specific areas that are best addressed through directed interventions rather than blanket dismissals of the presumed lack of appreciation of the HSS in the system.

On a rhetorical level, it is therefore quite unfortunate that the ASSAf report<sup>1</sup> – rather indiscriminately – refers to the ‘crisis’ of the Humanities and in one instance even to the ‘demise of the Humanities’. The presumed crisis of the Humanities is primarily based on the decline in university enrolments in some fields in the HSS (not all). In addition, the report refers to<sup>1</sup>:

[T]wo other trends [that] appear to constitute this crisis: the small number of scholarly book publications as standard outputs of Humanities faculties throughout the world, and the poor quality of outputs reflected in the larger number of non-accredited publications that dominate the publishing landscape.

It is debatable whether the small number of book publications in our system in itself contributes to a crisis for the HSS. The fact of the matter is that book publications are recognised for subsidy purposes by the DHET and, even more to the point, ASSAf itself recommended in one of its own reports in 2009 that the weights accorded to monographs in the subsidy system be increased.<sup>3</sup> The second trend referred to above – the ‘poor quality of output in non-accredited publications’ – represents an incorrect interpretation of the fact that the bulk of HSS articles are published in local (non-ISI) journals. Local journals are in fact accredited by the DHET – more so than in most other countries. Again, ASSAf has itself been at the forefront of a campaign to ensure that the quality of local journals are assured and improved. In the final analysis the claim regarding the ‘crisis’ in the Humanities is based on the decline in enrolments in the HSS. Although this decline is the case for enrolments at the undergraduate level and even lower postgraduate levels, it is not the case at the doctoral level for all fields. A comparison between the 2005 and 2009 doctoral enrolment figures (Higher Education Management Information System/HEMIS data) by CESH (Classification of Educational Subject Matter) category reveals increases in enrolments in 13 fields (African Languages, English, Linguistics, Music, Drama, Visual Arts, Economics, Geography, Politics, History, Philosophy, Sociology and ‘Other Social Sciences’), whereas enrolments declined in only 9 fields (Afrikaans, Anthropology, Psychology, Communication, Law, Librarianship, Public Management, Religion and ‘Other Fine Arts’).

In general, both reports emphasise the ‘weak’ status or plight of the Humanities with little appreciation of the fact that many Social Science disciplines and Social Science research are in fact flourishing. This expansion is especially the case in many interdisciplinary fields such as social studies of HIV and/or AIDS research, the burgeoning industry of policy, monitoring and evaluation studies in the country over the past ten years, and the vast number of studies being conducted on basic education and schooling and ways of improving the quality of learning. The relative silence about the appreciation (and financial support) that these disciplines

enjoy, creates a skewed picture and does not serve the overall cause of the HSS well.

## Are the Humanities and Social Sciences a special case?

A specific weakness of the charter report<sup>2</sup> is that it does not distinguish sufficiently between the state of the HSS and all other fields of science. I will refer to two examples only: (1) the issue of a highly differentiated (‘unequal’) higher education system; and (2) its discussion of the profile of doctoral enrolments and graduates in the country. The charter devotes much space to critiquing the existence of substantial inequalities between institutions in our higher education system. I refer to two paragraphs in this regard<sup>1</sup>:

It was obvious – and it is obvious to anyone who does not have vested interests in the status quo – that left as it is to play itself out, the existing system will increase inequalities within institutions and between them, will strengthen the small number of institutions that are doing well within existing parameters, will not solve the current problems we have encountered, and will lead to serious inertia and, despite the presence of good and serious people at the chalk-face, mediocrity. (p. 27).<sup>2</sup>

We will have an enduring problem with an externally driven criterion of ‘wellness’: all things considered, there are only three institutions in South Africa that make it into the top 500 in the world. It is realistic to raise the number to six or seven in the next five years, through decisive interventions and state support. This would leave 17 institutions unattended. In terms of the existing South African performance system, there are six institutions that are high performers, a number that may increase to 10 in the next five years through decisive interventions and state support; this would leave 13 institutions out of the process. (p. 30).<sup>2</sup>

These paragraphs raise more questions than answers. Firstly, the authors must surely be aware that there is currently an intense debate on the nature of the differentiation within the higher education system (in fact some of these discussions were initiated by the DHET). In these discussions, various detailed and nuanced studies (especially by the Centre for Higher Education and Transformation) have been tabled.<sup>4</sup> Secondly, it is difficult to follow the logic of the two paragraphs when read together. The second quote seems to accept the reality of differentiation and even argue for interventions that will strengthen the second ‘tier’ of 10 universities in order to make them more competitive. But this runs counter to the first quote which suggests that the current system is inevitably leading to creating more inequalities and that the strong will only get stronger at the expense of the weaker institutions (it is also not obvious that ‘differentiation’ and ‘inequalities’ are necessarily correlated and therefore that mediocrity is the necessary result).

But my main point is that it is not clear how this argument about the entire system and the reality of differentiation strengthens the case for the HSS. There is no evidence that the differentiation in the system relates at all to differences between science fields in any systematic manner. In fact, close inspection of some of the strongest institutions in the system, such as Rhodes University, will show that the biggest single



domain of outputs at that institution is produced by the HSS. Similarly, institutions such as the University of the Western Cape and North-West University, which have improved both their output and impact in accredited journals in recent years, are institutions where the HSS have the strongest representation of all fields.

The second criticism refers to comments made in the charter report on doctoral enrolments and graduates. The comment in the ASSAf report by the Centre for Research on Evaluation, Science and Technology<sup>5</sup> refers to the fact that students from other African countries now constitute significant proportions of all doctoral enrolments (about 30%) and doctoral graduates (25%). In this context we encounter a rather surprising claim:

We already know that numbers of South African postgraduates have been declining, and the whole system is kept together because of the increasing presence of scholars from north of the Limpopo. (p. 28).<sup>2</sup>

The statement is ambiguous in a number of respects: firstly, it is not clear whether the 'declining numbers' refer to doctoral enrolments or graduates or both; secondly, a rather sweeping statement is made about how the 'foreign' students are keeping the whole system together. The fact of the matter is that although the number of first time doctoral students has flattened off in recent years, the overall number of doctoral graduates increased significantly between 2000 and 2010. This fact does not mean that there is no cause for concern as there has been very little growth in both enrolments and graduates of local students. It is true that the growth in foreign students has been largely responsible for the increase in overall numbers of doctoral students. But, again the report fails to make a special case for the Humanities as the contribution of foreign students (at least from other African countries) is very similarly distributed across all fields of science.

## Are the recommendations realistic and practicable?

The ASSAf report makes 10 recommendations which, in my opinion, are both more realistic and supported by the evidence produced. The charter report on the other hand ends up making a vast array of recommendations and proposals of very different quality and possible import (surely Occam's razor should have been applied?). The vast majority of recommendations are not properly argued (e.g. it is not obvious that an Academy of the Humanities will in fact strengthen the case for the Humanities in the country) or completely ignore national initiatives, such as the innovative initiatives at the Universities of the Witwatersrand (the Consortium for Advanced Research Training in Africa), Stellenbosch (the African Doctoral Academy) and Johannesburg (the Winter School in Research Methods) in doctoral training and mentoring. In fact, the recommendations that are made to address the challenges surrounding doctoral students (such as virtual schools) seem to have been made without any consideration of the well-researched findings and recommendations of the ASSAf PhD study.<sup>6</sup>

One could even argue that some of the recommendations reveal a distinct ignorance about the existing system. The two quotes below are cases in point:

The need for the Academy (here the role of an Institute becomes strained) to create a national committee that works actively (in consultation with national professional associations) on the recognition of South African and other relevant journals by the 'authorising' and accrediting centres of the international scholarly community is obvious. As one participant noted, 'our own local journals are not given enough weight, and as a result we perpetuate the system we have [and] those journals don't develop'. (p. 29).<sup>2</sup>

There is consensus among deans in HSS and academic staff that the national system has to recognise 'a HSS uniqueness': books and chapters in books should be rewarded, and not only accredited journal articles. To illustrate: 'We get very little funding for the book chapters and in some cases books and chapters are not even regarded – those things will impact on our image.' (p.30).<sup>2</sup>

Both quotes are factually incorrect. Local journals are in fact given huge recognition and afforded equal weight in the DHET funding system. In fact, not only do they receive exactly the same weight as international journals that are ISI listed, but some would argue that the system as such currently serves to subsidise many of the smaller local journals which would not otherwise survive. The second quote is equally wrong, as chapters in books are in fact recognised for funding purposes. The point is that faulty evidence is cited (without correction) in support for a more general recommendation to establish a separate academy for the HSS.

In a related manner, very strong claims (and subsequent recommendations) are made about the NRF based on a single anecdotal piece of evidence. The charter cites one academic who levels strong criticism against the NRF which he or she claims has:

a dreaded, a kind of a lack of understanding of at least my field in that institution. Colleagues of mine have sent in proposals for grants and they don't get sent to philosophers to review, they get sent to people in other fields and it's just very clear [that] there's just a lack of comprehension of the language or even the concepts going on. One time a colleague of mine did receive money, but the comments that came with it were something to the effect of: it's rare that the NRF fund the esoteric social sciences, and so in this case we will do so. Philosophy... you're describing philosophy as an esoteric social science – I mean, it's just bizarre to me. *Ja*, really, it's really disturbing.<sup>2</sup>

On the basis of this quote, the Charter then draws two far-reaching conclusions: firstly that the NRF has 'distorted national scholarship and excellence in the HSS' and, secondly, that this kind of critique points to the:

necessary re-evaluation of the NRF's mission, vision and practices – a demand that is beyond the mandate of our Task Team. Not only should the NRF be reviewed, but the reward system also needs to be reconfigured. (p. 42).<sup>2</sup>

There are unfortunately many more instances in the charter where far-reaching conclusions and recommendations are drawn without the required substantiating evidence. It is



unfortunate as many HSS scholars may even be sympathetic of some of the conclusions reached (although perhaps in a more nuanced way), but it is difficult to support the way in which such conclusions are presented.

## Conclusion

In my view these two reports raise important issues – some of which are not only relevant to the HSS but to all scientific fields in our national science system. It is therefore the more unfortunate that both reports suffer from critical errors and lack of evidence (the charter more so) that weaken the case that they make for the HSS in the country. However, it would be in the interest of the HSS community to look beyond the methodological and other substantive problems of these reports, and to focus on the important issues that they raise and concentrate the debate on these.

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