

The Humanities Do Count

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The future of the Humanities is on the national agenda. Normally, Humanities scholars see threats everywhere. But this agenda, emanating from two different Ministries, Science and Technology via ASSAf (Academy of Science of SA) on the one hand, and DoHET on the other, offer both recognition and strategy. The Humanities are everywhere under threat in our increasingly instrumentalist world which has resulted in a massive, global, postmodern lumpenproletariat. Universities post Cold War have become intellectual factories serving business, policy and global capital. Humanities scholars think of themselves as the last bulwark against capitulation to

socially alienating technicist, ahistorical and economistic imperatives.

Humanities scholars claim the humanistic high ground. They aim to protect the practice of critique, the dialectic, and thus democracy itself. Social issues are best resolved through research and dialogue. As the word ‘humanities’ suggests, critique should recognise that it is **people** (who feel, hope, love and fear) who occupy instrumentalist structures created by often alienating regulation.

Scientists admit the importance of the Humanities. That the first of the two reports was issued by ASSAf attests to this. ASSAf recognises that the Humanities are in “crisis”, resulting from contemporary overemphasis on science and technology, career pathing and financial gain, in the context of the ‘developmental state’. Given the stark class disparities in South Africa, the Humanities are often considered a luxury.

ASSAF however recommends the institutionalization of the Humanities within national science policy. For our College, the key findings are that:

- the Humanities need revitalization, better funding, and its research output internationally published
- an ageing academic workforce needs to reproduce itself, especially via the recruitment of black scholars. Reproduction is best secured through PhD acquisition, a key UKZN policy
- The myth that a Humanities degree is synonymous with unemployment is emphatically disproved. *Humanities graduates are, for the most part, employed or self-employed.* The principal sectors are: i) teaching and training; ii) management and administration; and iii) advising and consulting.
- Humanities graduates earn less than science and engineering graduates. Temporary employment often occurs before settling into the full-time professional sector. Key here is the clear fit between graduates’ Humanities subjects and their professional work. Thus is another myth shattered about the so-called B(ugger) A(all) degree.

Unlike the ASSAf study, the DoHET Charter attracted national media exposure. The significance of ASSAf report is that it directly dismisses popular myths that denigrate a Humanities degree vis-à-vis employment prospects. Where ASSAf sought to reveal the social and employment value of a Humanities degree in general, the Charter, as its title suggests, offers concrete strategies for intervention, rationalisation, and re-organisation of the tertiary sector within the context of a newly democratising, developing country. It recommends the establishment of specific instruments, centres/institutes, panels and virtual entities to implement and operationalise specific policies and to measure performance and quality, development and fit within national developmental priorities. The committees will work with national associations, develop international collaborative frameworks, and develop capacity.

The Charter speaks to policy-makers and institutions. The ASSAf Study addresses student, parent and Humanities lecturer concerns. What is curious is that the ASSAf report is not referenced in the Charter. The principle of academic autonomy assumed by ASSAf will be a factor to consider when the Charter is implemented.

Significantly, the Charter fractures the common-sense notion derived from the Berlin Conference of 'Africa' of a homogeneous, isolated, entity. It proposes an open-ended definition that tactically locates Africa-in-the World. A programme that connects African universities within the continent and these with overseas institutions is proposed. Proposals are made on splitting the NRF, revising research incentive criteria, and on staff:student ratios. The Charter uses political language like "corrective interventions" and in devising "African approaches to the humanities". Wonderfully, it calls for recognition of the full spectrum of research output, including books.

The Charter's planning is in the detail, but the budgeting is in the realm of (a welcome) idealism that is going to test the neoliberal imperatives that are, ironically, pushing the academy towards instrumentalism, managerialism and massification. Where the ASSAf report examines 'what is', and possibly 'what might be', revealing empirically that Humanities graduates are undoubtedly employable, the Charter offers a very detailed plan. Perhaps it is assumed that the budget will become clearer once the proposal plans start getting traction?? The investment will be major as will be the benefits.

Very welcome is the holistic engagement of the still very fragmented, parochial and often dysfunctional tertiary sector. The Charter will elevate our institutions into the global arena in which Africans will begin to think of their futures, not just take refuge in imaginaries of 'the past'. The two reports when read **together** provide both the analysis and the strategy. The "Year of the College" proposals intersect well with this imperative.

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