The principle of an NRF rating system for the humanities and social sciences: ameliorating the Judgment of Paris

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ABSTRACT
The National Research Foundation (NRF) is proposing to introduce a ratings system for the humanities and social sciences comparable to that which pertains in the natural sciences. The article welcomes this development, and argues for full and open consultation with the research community regarding appropriate ratings criteria. These should take a clear view of the social mission of the humanities and social sciences, and require that researchers demonstrate the public impact of their work. The article urges greater awareness of the necessity of building a national community of intellect, and more critical scrutiny of the purpose and impact of international recognition as a criterion of research performance in the social sciences and humanities.

Everyone in the South African academy knows that a rating system for the humanities and social sciences, comparable to that which has been in place in the natural sciences for some years now, is about to be introduced by the National Research Foundation (NRF) as part of its new integrated approach to research development and management.

We believe this to be a good thing. Colleagues in the sciences report that, if one ignores some initial teething troubles and the endemic disquiet of those whose performance doesn’t meet the criteria, or who feel they have been unjustly treated, the experience has been a positive one. An Evaluation of the Core Programme for the period 1990-1994 published by the Foundation for Research Development (FRD) in October 1997 puts the percentage of positive comments, and positive comments with qualification, at 80.4%; while negative comments and negative comments with qualification stand at 6.2%. The remainder comprises neutral comments and non responses (1997:42). Admittedly this evaluation was carried out among grant holders – the responses from those whose applications had been turned down might have been illuminating but nevertheless, the rating system has evidently provided some measure of attainment that helps to define the “playing field”, the parameters within which research performance can be openly acknowledged and assessed.

Some will dissent from this evaluation. That is their right, and probably the specifics of the system could be improved: they nearly always can be. Our purpose in this article is not to anticipate the precise details of a rating system for the humanities and social sciences, nor to prejudge anomalies which may emerge in practice, but to explore more general issues that will and must arise from the introduction of a rating system per se; in the hope of contributing positively to the debate which the promulgation and implementation of the system will undoubtedly generate.

Our academic background is in the humanities and education, and we find ourselves collaborating here by virtue of shared engagement with teacher training, language policy in education, and issues in multiculturalism and research development.

VARIOUS DISCIPLINES – ONE RATING SYSTEM?

The old separation between the FRD and the Centre for Science Development (CSD) (embracing the Human Sciences Research Council and the Social Sciences Research Council) had the merit of clearly distinguishing apples, pears and plums. Science is Science, the Humanities are what they are, likewise the Social Sciences. Competition for national recognition and funding took place within these clearly differentiated fields of research endeavour, with multidisciplinary and cross disciplinary research encouraged and catered for.

Under the new dispensation authorities want to affirm an apparent truism, namely, that apples, pears and plums are all fruit, and should be treated as such. Research is research, to be promoted and managed...
within a unified system. The motive behind the streamlining, as explained by representatives of the NRF in a series of consultative meetings held country wide towards the end of 2000, is one of administrative efficiency and a desire to focus South Africa’s research effort more effectively. From an administrative perspective there are clear advantages, and the affirmation of a uniform national research system is to some degree intellectually attractive.

Even so, within the new system, apples (Science) will form one administrative category, and pears and plums (the Humanities and Social Sciences) will be managed together as another.

It is true that for forty years and more, there has been growing interdisciplinarity cooperation within the latter fields, yet nobody is going to argue that they are in any sense the same. Cooperation does not indicate merging or assimilation. What is happening is that the two are increasingly borrowing findings and certain strains of discourse from each other, as researchers reach across disciplinary boundaries and broaden their competencies. They sometimes cooperate in the formulation of curricula and in teaching. Nevertheless, the humanities and social sciences remain distinct in their assumptions, methodologies and outcomes.

Why then are the two “yoked by violence” together? A suspicion arises that they form an administrative category that should read “Everything other than Science”?

To this new uneasy collocation of research fields a rating system modelled on the one used for the sciences how closely remains to be seen is to be applied. There is nothing wrong with this notion in principle, provided the criteria informing the rating process acknowledge appropriately the complex disciplinary identities within the two fields.

This is crucial. The criteria must reflect both the intrinsic nature of the disciplines and their relation to current South African realia. In our, admittedly scanty, understanding of research evaluation procedures in the sciences, the over riding concern is always “Is this good science?” after which issues of relevance, topicality, research capacity development, social value, past performance, cost ratios and so forth are invoked. In general, no matter the particular science involved, scientific performance is typically measured in terms of articles published in accredited journals, and the higher their prestige and so called “impact rating”, the better. A modestly useful field like taxonomy might not be as “hot” as some rapidly burgeoning aspect of microbiology, but nevertheless, scientific performance can be measured under reasonably uniform criteria. Science is science it’s as simple as that.

The situation in the humanities and social sciences is very different so different, in fact, that at this point we are going temporarily to narrow the range of discussion to selected issues within two disciplinary fields, ones with which we are each familiar, and which illustrate some of the diversities which an under nuanced system imported from the sciences might either fail to recognize or simply obliterate. The deliberately contrasting disciplinary illustrations are drawn from the fields of educational research and literary scholarship.

LITERARY SCHOLARSHIP

To take the least promising (from a science oriented paradigm, that is) first: literary scholarship is in fact often distinguished from research because, on a strictly material definition, it can be produced without discovering or exploiting “new” sources. Literary research must involve the investigation of primary sources, including the reexamination of those “re searched” before. Literary scholarship, on the other hand, can rely on secondary sources, modern editions, the earlier research of others, extrinsic theory, appropriate history, sociology, ready made paleography, established chronologies and still produce valuable original work, work which is highly “rated” within the discipline. Academic value is added by the scholar through interpretation, theoretical treatment, adroit deployment of earlier scholarship, illuminating historical juxtaposition, qualities of language and intellectual style, all of which adds up to a fresh (original) approach.

In the scientific world, including the social sciences, procedures of this kind would be regarded as deeply suspect. They do not comply with what scientists, even social scientists, understand by the advance ment of learning to employ Bacon’s venerable phrase. The reductio ad absurdum would be a scientist merely shuffling the hard research findings of others, and republishing them with some modest level of reinterpretation. Even though they are not “new” or original in the fundamental sense of engaging with pristine material, such procedures are thoroughly consonant with well established practices in the humanities, and produce what is rightly regarded as new knowledge.

It is not a question of funding that is here at issue, but of what ranges of activity within the field of literary study will qualify as “rateable”.

An unintended consequence, then, of thoughtlessly applying a scientific paradigm to literary scholarship might be to eliminate much of it in favour of strictly literary research, as defined above. The end result would probably be a plethora of narrowly focused articles on minor primary sources, obscure writers, editions of letters and other documents, increased emphasis on bibliographical research, and so forth:
anything which demands work with primary sources, however trite

“What’s wrong with that?” one may ask. The higher order areas of synthesis, criticism and evaluation, upon which much of the public impact of the discipline rests, would inadvertently have been contracted in response to a particular research paradigm one not accepted in the discipline as comprehensive, but by analogy close to that which makes sense in a scientific environment. An opposite response, where literary research is devalued in favour of scholarship is also conceivable, and in view of South Africa’s impoverished research capacity in fundamental literary research, this would be even more damaging. Unless the issue is spelled out in the ratings criteria, peer assessment will be hard pressed to take care of this problem for the simple reason that there are differing views within the discipline on what constitutes good literary research and scholarship.

COLLABORATIVE LITERARY RESEARCH

Another area where distinct differences arise is the question of collaborative research. In bibliography and textual criticism it is certainly possible to produce collaborative research. These sub disciplines are the nearest approach to science that exists in literary studies. It is also possible for such collaboration to happen in literary theory or history, which often adopt a “scientistic” pose in approach and expression.

But ask a literary scholar to collaborate in literary interpretation, scholarship, or criticism and one is likely to be met with disbelief. The incredulity arises from the perhaps exaggerated acceptance that literary scholarship is deeply personal. In good literary criticism and scholarship the highest fidelity to objective evidence should be united with deeply meditated subjectivity. In other words, literary scholarship is “written”, not “written up”.

For this reason, and others adduced above, the notion of collaborative research is countenanced by literary scholars only in strictly limited spheres. Examples would be cooperation in the production of multi authored volumes or series, participation as part of an editorial team producing some multi part reference work, or engagement in cross disciplinary dialogue. Although such undertakings involve important collaboration by humanities’ standards none of them necessarily compromises the individual voice or the individual judgment. Such interaction would be accounted minor in comparison with the degree of intellectual collaboration accepted as normal by natural and social scientists, and it is not of the same kind.

Nor is this solitary approach to literary scholarship a contingent weakness, as the analogy with science might suppose. True, it has drawbacks from a social perspective, as satirised by David Lodge in his early novel The British Museum is Falling Down: “… the Department … in any case espoused the traditional belief that research was a lonely and hermitic occupation, a test of character rather than learning, which might be vitiated by excessive human contact” (1983:117).

Present day literature departments try to ameliorate the solitariness of research through lively graduate seminars and discussion groups. No, the literary scholar’s objection to collaborative research is not procedural, or even temperamental (though it may be that too), but fundamental. To collaborate the way natural scientists do would be to vitiate much of the point of the research.

The upshot of this kind of argument is that possibilities for literary scholars working in research teams, collectively analyzing a problem, sharing out different aspects of it as sub projects using mutually agreed methodologies, inducting junior members of the team as research assistants, are strictly limited. They can cooperate within variously designed umbrella projects, to be sure, and research assistants can be assigned tasks within these projects, but these are not and never can be research programmes, as under stood by the natural scientists. The discipline simply doesn’t allow for routine intellectual collaboration of this kind, and to ask for it makes no sense.

This is neither obtuseness, obscurantism nor unwillingness to change. It is simply a disciplinary constraint that has to be respected.

There is a difference of attitude, too, to that staple currency of research performance in the sciences, the research article. Leaving aside the well known and reprehensible practice of “salami slicing” in the sciences, where wafer thin enhancements and variations of one research procedure are spread out to create a lengthy track of accredited research publications, the fact remains that the primary measure of research performance in the sciences is publication in accredited research journals; whereas in literary studies the journal article has an important rival in the book. It is widely acknowledged that the SAPSE system under values books because they have a different standing in the sciences. As we understand it, scientific books are either text books of varying degrees of specialisation, overviews of whole areas incorporating a multiplicity of research findings already available in the journal literature, or efforts to increase the public awareness and understanding of science through popular publication.

Research articles in the humanities, while they may be substantial, original and illuminating, are generally regarded as previews of the researcher’s final considered formulation, which will normally appear as a
book. Further, the gestation of this book may take years, rather than months.

The impact of applying the science paradigm to the humanities will undoubtedly be to accelerate productivity, in terms of the volume of articles, as has been the case with the sciences. Whether it will also improve quality is a moot point whose outcome will depend solely on the judgment of the evaluating panels, journal editors and the integrity of the researcher. Reports from the sciences on this matter of quality are variable.

A third question arises from the current state of literary studies as a discipline. Partly as a result of pursuing the professional research paradigm, which has grown in emphasis in literary studies since the 1950s, much has happened to separate literary studies from its matrix in society. Devotion to professional discourse, some of which is needlessly arcane, and also to the less salutary pressures of “professionalism”, have combined to diminish the impact of literary studies on society at large, so much so that literary debate remains to an overwhelming extent immured in the academy. We must see that the ratings criteria do not reinforce this unhappy state of affairs.

Literary scholarship can meet the demand for social relevance. Unless we accept that such scholarship is in general a good thing, and in principle relevant, because language and literature shape and nurture an important part of our humanity, there is no argument in favour of funding literary scholarship. If, however, this principle is accepted, as it surely must be, then we come up against a strange anomaly. Articles in literary research publications have stunningly little impact on the general public; most of whom are hardly aware that there is such a thing as a research periodical. Even among research specialists, the impact of research article publication in the humanities seems oddly ineffectual. Lewis Wolpert notes that internationally “85 per cent of science literature that is, articles in scientific journals is quoted in other articles once or not at all by the end of the ten years reveals that not only were very few academics carrying out research at all, but those who were, were seldom addressing fundamental questions of teaching and learning in South Africa. Research programmes derived from an explicit, field encompassing map of national research priorities, one
that has been debated and modified by the research community itself, might prove a valuable instrument in addressing this deficiency. Modest gestures in this direction made by the De Lange Commission (1981) have not as yet found contemporary expression.

Without such criteria of acknowledged cogency, the introduction of a rating system in educational research is likely to produce unintended consequences, though these will be very different from those contemplated above in relation to literary scholarship.

It is perfectly possible to sit in the study and develop article after article, position after position, publish this work in high powered journals, disseminate it at international conferences, and still have a negligible impact on educational transformation. Is this “A” rated research behaviour?

We must avoid a situation where educational research careers along at a giddy pace, inflating and deflecting paradigm after paradigm, while the situation on the ground remains all too horribly the same. Text based educational research is fun to do, sometimes it is even relatively easy (compared, say, with mentoring a teacher and coping with 50 children daily in chaotic surroundings with few books and a grotty classroom); and with the added incentive of the ratings chase, the increased emphasis on research may well turn some of our best educational minds away from the real challenges.

Even where educational research is based on well conceived and conducted classroom investigation, the issue of developing an appropriate response to the findings, replicating the research, building consensus, testing the intervention, lobbying for its widespread introduction takes time, persistence and a lot of work not directly related to basic research. Will the rating system encourage this kind of intervention? Will the kind the country needs? Or will it encourage a lofty retreat into jargon ridden educational theory? This would be deeply ironical, for one of the thrusts within the revamped NRF quite rightly is practical transformation and development.

In other words, the danger of inappropriate competitive individualism, as encouraged by an opportunistic response to the ratings paradigm, raises its unhelpful head in a research environment demanding a very different attitude. Although the NRF grant allocation process clearly favours team research, inter institutional collaboration and research capacity building, in its last analysis it is still published articles that count, because this is the principle chosen index of research competence. Single author articles count for more. Particularly in education, paper research done by single individuals often based on idiosyncratic interest is unlikely to contribute to dealing with the educational challenges that confront us (cf Bassey 1995).

In our view, and with rare exceptions, committed educational researchers in South Africa at present will not take this route. Instead, we believe they will assume some degree of direct responsibility for educational transformation. This means advancing theoretical research hypotheses through an effective process of trailing and implementation. It involves institutionalization of the research in training programmes and course materials, close in service work with large numbers of teachers, in school implementation and monitoring, major involvement in advocacy, cooperation with provincial and national education authorities, probably intensive fundraising, and an ongoing programme of research based modification and guidance. It is intensely collaborative.

A concrete example may help here. A distinguished colleague of ours, the late Professor Len Lanham, set aside a research career in phonetics and phonology to address the educational problems of South Africa. The result was the Molteno Project, a language and literacy programme which, after more than twenty five years, informs the foundation phase of primary education in Namibia, Botswana, Lesotho, Zambia and large areas in the Republic. His adaptation of the British “Breakthrough” materials to suit this country would not have been possible without research experience in Soweto in the late 60s and early 70s which contributed to his understanding of the workings of South African bilingualism. The project turned into one of the largest NGOs in the country, a unique organization which had to be built, managed and sustained. Although in later years Lanham maintained a steady research output, and modest local conference attendance, there was nothing like the volume of research publication there would have been had he not been fulfilling the real aims of educational research – the resuscitation and development of the South African education system (see Kingwill 1998).

Would Professor Lanham be judged an A rated educational researcher? Which of the suggested courses will a researcher of integrity and initiative adopt? Which course does the introduction of a rating system based on research publication, as in the natural sciences, encourage?

GENERAL IMPACT

There is, obviously, much more that could be said about specific impacts a rating system may have within the two disciplines on which we have chosen to comment. There will be equally distinctive implications for several others among the heterogeneous disciplines lodged within the humanities and social sciences grouping. In addition to these, we believe
there will be some more general effects, which may be worth debating.

Science is inherently international. A local application is merely one instance of a general scientific principle or finding. The situation is perennially more complicated with the humanities and social sciences, because they grow out of specific societies that are not only their matrices but also their subjects. It follows that work in these disciplines is inherently comparative. Thus arises the need to maintain a balance between South African and other than South African work in the disciplines making up these fields.

Ratings with inappropriate criteria could penalize comparative or non South African or non African work in the humanities and social sciences. This would undoubtedly impoverish the South African academy, leading to weaker research and weaker teaching. There is considerable likelihood of this happening should the provisions of the NRF’s trial Focus Areas for the year 2000 remain un amended (see Wright 2000). Conversely, ratings with different but equally inappropriate criteria could lead to a flood of research oriented to metropolitan (or “international”) themes at the expense of South African concerns postmodern theory provides appropriate examples or cases where local issues are dressed in metropolitan guise to meet international criteria of publication relevance.

To guard against this we need a strong local intellectual community, whose disciplinary dis courses, while not neglecting international work in the humanities and social sciences, are engaged with South African needs and thought ways, and whose theoretical resources, local and international, have been honed under African skies, rather than being obvious imports slackly replicated to cast a superficial veneer over local concerns. To foster this local and national intellectual culture, we need to take concrete steps, and these steps demand ratings criteria sensitive to the real dynamic of work in the humanities and social sciences.

This is not parochialism. Indeed, there are few academic disciplines that are not, in principle if not always in practice, deeply international. Instead, it is a plea for South African researchers to engage with national issues and make a local impact. Sitting in a study at the tip of Africa, attending conferences from Budapest to Bolivia, and publishing in the US and UK (because this is prestigious) has become deeply inappropriate, in our view.

A different but related dissatisfaction was recently expressed by Jeffrey Mabebelele and Nkosana Sibuyi in the pages of the Sowetan, regarding the relevance of research undertaken in some language depart ments: “Academics teaching language studies are forced to publish for the sake of publishing, with no consideration given to accountability and relevance as hallmarks of higher education. ... [At a recent conference] titles of papers included: Deviating from identity; syntagmatic constraints in Xhosa nasal assimilation and palatalisation; Noun class prefix stacking in Bantu; and Consonant germination as a universal phonological process” (Mabebelele & Sibuyi 2000:10). The potential scientific interest of these articles is not (we hope) in question. What evidently niggled the two correspondents is the complacent abstraction from society of the research paradigm such work assumes. It may be no coincidence that the authors, though writing in their private capacity, both work for the Pan South African Language Board (PANSALB), the body faced with the practical task of fostering appropriate multilingualism in South Africa.

Very often the natural scientist’s work already has tangible local linkage, in that it has been commissioned and paid for by an outside client: a professional body, an environmental agency, an industry, or commercial consortium, for example. It is clearly wanted by society, or by some element within the society. Such relationships obviously need careful ethical scrutiny to ensure that the integrity of the research process is not compromised, but increasingly such partnerships are seen as a way forward in a climate of financial stringency. This happy congruence between researcher and financier is lampooned in the following conversation between a non too scrupulous entrepreneur and a university Provost, from Jane Smiley’s comic novel Moo (1995:73):


Surely there is an equivalent nexus for the social sciences and humanities, one which has perhaps been implicit and needs to be emphasised now? Perhaps we need consciously to acknowledge that research in the humanities and social sciences has achieved value only when it is appreciated by or makes a difference to the human community. Even if one’s field of specialization is the Italian Risorgimen to, or “anomie after Durkheim”, or the influence of T S Eliot on West African poetry in the 50s, there must be some vitalizing input into the society which is supporting the research, an input above and beyond merely disseminating knowledge in the course of journal publication and normal university teaching. With much social science this impact is obvious. With some social science research and much of the work done in the humanities, it is not. Where is the popular
book, the literary festival or summer school appearance, the textbook or other piece of educational technology, the radio interview, the public lecture, the workshop, the school visit? The social contribution of the humanities can be validated only within an appreciative community. These disciplines are there to nurture and inform society.

We are perhaps not used to seeing and acknowledging this part of the problem but the humanities have traditionally had a developmental thrust. Their purpose is to effect changes in human sensibility, in political or religious outlook, in cultural awareness. If this is not happening because the relevant intellectual currents are trapped in the academy, then the research process has gone awry. Public, not just professional dissemination, is part of the job.

This is hardly the case with the natural sciences. Efforts to promote the public understanding and awareness of science, though fortunately on the increase, are not intrinsic to the scientific vocation though some would argue they should be. They are largely attempts to redress past neglect of public education, to attract more recruits to the profession, and to counter public distrust. With the humanities, on the other hand, we would urge that some form of direct public dissemination or implementation is intrinsic to research in this area of intellectual endeavour.

It is difficult to pinpoint an intrinsic contrast between the humanities and the natural science paradigm in this regard, but there is an important difference between contributing to an international store of knowledge, as a natural scientist does, knowing that the results are readily available for application world wide; and a humanities researcher whose contribution to knowledge lies locked in specialized research journals, known only to a small coterie of fellow specialists, and hardly available for public scrutiny. This is not the equivalent of the scientist's "blue sky" research, though compliant humanities researchers might like to think so. It is achieved research whose meaning and significance have not been shared with society.

There has been considerable public discussion recently about South African universities adhering to a narrowly academic role and despising or neglecting their intellectual duties (see, for example, Seepe 2000, and Ramphele 1997). Gultig (1999) has made the controversial assertion that education generally in South Africa is profoundly anti-intellectual. There is an element of truth in this view, and it would be unfortunate if the tendency carried through to the ratings criteria. In Education, for instance, do we want researchers to engage with educational problems by, for example, involving themselves in policy making and Department of Education committees and work shops; publishing in newspapers and teachers’ journals (such as The Teacher, or The Educator’s Voice); writing books oriented towards teachers and policy makers? Or do we want them to stick to academic journals? We need to reward academics for developing an intellectual community in South Africa, and to question any rating system that fails formally to take this into account in the ratings criteria it promulgates.

We are not suggesting that the NRF should necessarily fund such implementation and public dissemination the process of implementation in education, for example, is too lengthy and arduous to require that the NRF see the process through to its resolution. Instead, we are arguing that the undertaking of such activity should be part of the criteria for research rating; otherwise the "laboratory to publication" ethos which dominates the natural sciences will win out, and the ratings process will both dim the mission of the humanities and social sciences, and diminish the social impact of the funding the research agency makes available on the basis of it.

LOCAL ACADEMIC JOURNALS

The fostering of a vital research community in South Africa has many other aspects that will not remain unaffected by the rating system. For example, there is renewed need to support the growth and development of local academic journals. At the moment, the reverse is happening. Many South African journals are either folding or in danger of doing so. Examples of defunct local products in the field of language and education include The Language Projects’ Review (later Bua!), the ELTIC Reporter, and CRUX. Note that these particular publications were not accredited research journals. Instead, while they published some research, their main task was to mediate research findings, classroom experience and debate to educators and language practitioners. They were highly valued as practical intervention vehicles. They have not yet been replaced.

Other journals are de camping to international production houses, not least because the work involved in producing and distributing a local journal detracts from research time and currently receives little recognition from the NRF. Yet local ownership, and financial and academic support for this kind of publishing undertaking, is a vital part of creating a regional and national academic community. Where possible, South Africa should abstain from yielding to the ease of international production. Particularly for the humanities and social sciences, the ratings process should positively encourage local production of these journals, and validate participation in “editorial duties” (editing, refereeing, reviewing).

Publication in and production of local research
journals is to be encouraged because it is a means to building a sustaining national community of intellect. This may be much less the case with the natural sciences, once more, because “Science is Science”; but it is certainly not true that the humanities and social sciences can afford to see the best of local research effort thinly diffused through the international research literature. Can one imagine a British academic being told it’s not good enough to publish in the British Journal of Educational Philosophy, he or she must publish in the American one!

Again, the issue of “international” recognition claims attention. How much of this is a throw back to the apartheid situation where the sciences, never mind the humanities and social sciences, were struggling to remain part of the international academic world? How much of it is “colonial cringe”: the need to strut your stuff on a prestigious platform because, after all, it is Western Europe and the US that really count? How much of it is unwillingness to become involved in Africa’s needs? How much of it is driven by genuine specialization and the need for international collaboration? We don’t know the answers, but we are convinced that such factors are in play within the humanities and social sciences in a manner not apparent in the natural sciences.

A balance is necessary. More than international dissemination, in the humanities and social sciences at present the need is for intensity of national engagement, and while of course publication in the most prestigious international research journals is important as is the case with the natural sciences for the humanities and social sciences we have to ask the challenging question. “Who benefits?” Clearly, the individual researcher benefits through international contact, networking opportunities, further international invitations, more opportunities to publish internationally, greater transferability. In other words, he or she benefits according to the rules of the game the introduction of inappropriate ratings criteria will reinforce. But to what extent does South Africa benefit? To what extent does the ordinary citizen who pays for the research benefit?

In the sciences the answer is relatively clear. There are more or less direct material benefits, provided grants have been allocated appropriately to foster both useful applications and some “blue sky” research. In the humanities and social sciences, the scramble for international publication is less obviously the over riding sine qua non of appropriate research practice. We are aware that this is heresy to conventional wisdom in South Africa at the moment. But think about it. Do British and American academics have to worry about impoverishing their own intellectual environment by publishing abroad? No, they are concerned that publishing abroad will mean that their work is not noticed at home. If South Africa is to achieve that same degree of intellectual confidence and perhaps a unique, internationally valued academic identity something natural scientists certainly aspire to we have to publish here, first, add to this a commitment to relate the implications of our research to the local scene in a meaningful way, and then share this experience internationally.

THE SOCIAL BASE OF RESEARCH

Research should not be allowed to become self-contained, a self-validating process wherein publication per se is the blue chip outcome. This would be to neglect both the intellectual environment that nurtures research possibilities, and the purpose of the research. If published research is the only route by this we mean not only the necessary but the sufficient condition to qualify for research funding, why would one ever agree to organize a conference, referee an article, review a book, talk on the radio, give a public lecture, write a popular book, serve on boards of management, administer scholarships, serve on academic committees, or do any other of the countless things that go to make up the academic vocation? All these are essential to the university environment, and particularly so to the health of the humanities and social sciences. The effort to stream line the academic world so that it becomes more “productive” through the imposition of narrow and unrealistic ratings criteria, unless checked by a broader understanding of the academic vocation, could end up diminishing the social value of tertiary institutions.

We also suspect that in the humanities and social sciences the rating system may lead to a regrettable emphasis on “quick” research, for instance loose applications rooted in existing theory (usually imported from “outside”) that stretch no boundaries but can be relied upon to result in a number of publications acceptable to overseas journals. We need to examine the extent to which our research priorities are driven by those of international journals, rather than local needs. The kind of research we need to do in South Africa at present in the humanities and social sciences working from the ground up, developing theory, working with local knowledge takes a lot of time and holds out no guarantees of quick publication.

Above all, the rating system sends a strong message that research takes precedence over everything else. Even when one accepts, as we do, that ongoing research engagement is essential to good teaching what, apart from personal integrity, is to prevent the enthusiastic researcher from simply skimping on his or her teaching commitments in order to devote more effort to research? The historian Paul Maylam, in his presidential address to the South African Historical Society in 1995, put it bluntly (1995:7): “We all know that the recognition and the rewards come mainly
from research output, not from teaching” and he was writing well in advance of any immediate prospect of a ratings system. To teaching we might add academic administration, engagement with social and political issues, popularization and public dissemination of research findings, contributions to policy formation for government and in NGO’s, community and social development drawing on academic expertise, service on advisory or examining bodies, etc. Teaching and particularly supervision of postgraduate students a time consuming business, especially if one is nurturing new researchers from disadvantaged backgrounds will take a back seat, even where such students may be funded on a rated researcher’s grant.

Why is this so? Because the ratings system is tied directly to career prospects. In particular, if transfer ability is important to a young academic, in other words, the ability to move upwards in the pecking order of tertiary institutions in this country or abroad, then a good research rating will be vital. Given a choice between two acceptable candidates for a post, the one with the better rating will get the job. The reason is not purely intellectual. The rated researcher brings his or her own funding or, in a different country, the likelihood that this situation will soon be re established within the local system. Consequently, a hungry young researcher faces the temptation of ruthless ness in his or her dedication to the ratings chase. “Why should we bother about the national or local impact of our work? Let’s get it done so that we can move up and on lucrative emigration beckons!” increasingly, this could become a prevalent attitude. And when each new appointment introduces yet another of this breed, the institutional ethos changes.

Any national funding agency will should at this point argue that its only interest is the stimulation and funding of research excellence. Academics are to be rated solely in terms of research performance, expertly defined. Other academic values and competencies are not the responsibility or the concern of the agency. Research funders generally affirm that the full dimensions of academic commitment are outside their purview or influence.

To this the reply must be, paraphrasing the immortal words of Mandy Rice Davies, “Well they would, wouldn’t they” (see Irving et al 1963). What else can they say? Nevertheless, one simply cannot assess probable consequences of the introduction of a ratings system ceteris paribus. Its influence willloom large in every aspect of personal and institutional academic decision making.

From the institutional point of view, South African universities do not have the resources to fund a high level of research commitment from endowments. It is not only the research funding that is the problem, but the Staff Cost Units (SCU’s) involved. The result is that to achieve a particular target rating profile, the distribution of teaching and administration has to be skewed within departments to favour the productive researchers. (This problem can be particularly acute for smaller institutions, where smaller staff complements are stretched over the same subject fields.)

Nationally, a similar situation prevails, where more funding will go to a few top researchers, and those of modest ability will probably not receive NRF backing, except in certain privileged categories. This may not be wholly a bad thing, because not only will it force keen researchers to look beyond the largesse of the NRF milch cow, but it also provides them with opportunities to persuade non governmental agencies of the value of research priorities that may differ from the profile developed by the NRF. The scenario where the total research profile of South Africa is determined overwhelmingly by the NRF is a dangerous one, which neither the NRF nor the collective wisdom of South Africa’s research capacity should endorse. Fortunately, the country is still very attractive to international funding agencies, particularly in the fields of social, educational and economic development. This is where colleagues in the natural sciences may find the going tougher (for a change!), than the humanities and social sciences.

THE JUDGMENT OF PARIS

In effect, then, South African academics in the humanities and social sciences are about to encounter their own version of the Judgment of Paris, a very usual contest which most researchers world wide face in some form or another under their different academic dispensations, but which is now to take a particular shape in this country. Not to put too fine a point upon it, our current academic environment is about to receive a brisk, and probably healthy, smack along a particular vector.

You recall the story. When the gods met for the wedding of Peleus and Thetis, the uninvited guest, Eris (strife) rolled a golden apple into the midst of the party, inscribed “to the most beautiful”. Instantly, the goddesses Athene, Hera and Aphrodite claimed the prize. Zeus asked Paris, youngest son of Priam and Hecuba, to choose the winner.

The contestants each offered him particular protection and favours. Hera (power and sovereignty) would make him ruler of all Asia; Athene (wisdom and military prowess) promised him wisdom and victory in all contests; while Aphrodite (beauty) offered him the love of Helen, wife of Menelaus, King of Sparta, the most beautiful of mortal women.

Paris of course gave the golden apple to Aphrodite.
She helped him woo and abduct Helen, who left her husband, taking with her all the valuables she could lay her hands on and this was the origin of the Trojan wars.

The new rating system is like the golden apple. It will force academics into making choices, not once or twice a year, but day by day, hour by hour. This article has suggested what some of those choices may be. The issue is whether research will become so dominant as to cause neglect or impoverishment in other aspects of the academic vocation, in a climate where there is very little material reward to nerve complementary endeavours. Will young academics take radical decisions, run off with sexy Helen to some remote island of research, and abandon other necessary dimensions of the academic life as far as possible?

We don’t know. As the saying goes, only time will tell, but clearly the careful definition, discussion and modification of draft ratings criteria prior to their promulgation and activation will be crucial to the success of this particular attempt to encourage research excellence.

CONCLUSION

Nothing said thus far should be construed as assuming the NRF to be unaware of the issues raised here, or as indicating that these are anything but a small sample of the many others that could be adduced. The NRF, in its emphasis on collaborative research, on capacity building, on international cooperation, on increased managerial autonomy for rated researchers, and so forth, demonstrates this awareness very clearly. It has a specific, considered agenda.

Instead, the point of this argument is to suggest that the NRF is precisely as limited in its powers and concerns as it claims to be, while the effects of the new strategy will have implications whose outcome rests on factors way beyond its influence.

In effect, the NRF is saying, “We cannot reward, (or ‘incentivise’), everything that goes to make up a healthy academic ecology. That is up to the individual academic and the particular university or other institution. We only promote research.” The trouble is, beyond the meager limits of its own discretionary financial resources, the university is left entirely to the goodwill of the academic conscience (or, more crudely, employee loyalty) to keep the system going, let alone make it prosper.

Contrast this with the situation in the United States, where Deans generally have charge of a special fund to reward initiative, innovation and success across the full academic spectrum, not just research, and they use the fund to encourage development in the institution across the board. This should not be construed as supine submission to materialist values, but an effort to demonstrate practically the intellectual and social importance of a wider range of intellectual activities than can fall under the research banner.

Research should not become the preserve of an academic elite judged solely on the grounds of publishing productivity. The academic system as a whole is dependant on the good faith and academic effort of a large cohort of people whom such a rating system ends up marginalising to some extent, particularly those all round academics whose commitment to research is tempered by the recognition of the broader intellectual needs within the society. This is a potential recipe for institutional friction, and there is very little financial emollient to stop the squeaking. But the development of fully competent, transparent ratings criteria could go a long way to getting all researchers on side in this attempt to improve the research effort.

The ultimate outcome of the ratings intervention will depend hugely on the quality and wisdom of the existing research dispensation within research institutions as they start to respond to the new scenario.

There is real danger that the rating system may deepen the divide between institutions with strong research traditions and those that are weak in this area (in South Africa, still largely a racial divide, and thus a dangerous one). South Africa has yet to develop an inclusive research environment. The NRF funding criteria clearly encourage collaboration between South African institutions (and between local and international institutions). This kind of collaboration takes time and patience each party has to build trust. It’s quicker and easier to make mere gestures towards collaboration, while maintaining a strong individual research programme. If the criteria encourage merely a long list of publications, and do not sufficiently consider the time and energy absorbed by constructive inter institutional work, transformation in this vital area is going to remain superficial. Otherwise, it may well be that the dispensation the NRF seeks to introduce will end up marginalising the very people it was designed to benefit most.

In short, promoted intelligently within a healthy academic institution and environment, with well motivated, reasonably remunerated academics who understand that there is more to the mission of academia in society than the ratings system, the results should be stimulating, if unpredictable. These institutions have the tradition and collective wisdom to steer a balanced course.

The impact of the system on a stressed and dysfunctional institution will probably be counter productive.
After a brief honeymoon period—say the first round of ratings—in such institutions we could be looking at a nightmare where increasingly the “international” research efforts of a few are supported by the routine teaching and administrative work of a disgruntled underclass of journeymen academics who have opted out of the game, while the conscientious all round researcher who takes a more *engagé* view of research in the social sciences and humanities is left in the wilderness, under funded yet doing a modest amount of valuable developmental research—the work which actually brings about the transformation the country needs.

Fortunately, numbers of academics in all our research institutions really are in the game both as a vocation and an avocation. They will find ways of doing what needs doing in and for the country, with or without the NRF and we say this without an iota of disrespect for the well intentioned efforts of the NRF. This is as it should be. Others will give up, slump into routine teaching, and use their talents in other, perhaps less socially and intellectually beneficial ways. A lot depends on the appropriateness and transparency of the ratings criteria. By making these appropriate at the outset, we may help to avoid, or at least ameliorate, a new Judgment of Paris within the academic community.

To sum up:

(1) We welcome the introduction of a ratings system for the Humanities and Social Sciences because of the boost this gives to the status of research within these disciplinary clusters.

(2) We request full and open consultation with the research community regarding appropriate ratings criteria. These should take a clear view of the social mission of the humanities and social sciences, and require that researchers demonstrate the public impact of their work. Without this documented impact, we don’t believe that the issue of high quality research in the humanities and social sciences can be properly addressed.

(3) We support greater awareness of the necessity of building a national community of intellect, and that contributions to this should always be part of the ratings requirements.

(4) We urge that the criteria for “international recognition” be carefully scrutinized to ensure that they do not impact negatively on the development of South Africa’s own research culture.

A last tongue in cheek point: ought this article to be seen as a rateable commodity? It certainly is not research, but was it worth writing?

REFERENCES


