The humanities in a changing South Africa: challenges and opportunities

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Abstract

For centuries the humanities and natural sciences were the two main pillars upholding the fundamental knowledge tradition of a university. A stronger focus on science, engineering and technology is necessary in South Africa to correct the present imbalances of student numbers and human resources in those fields. This, however, should not diminish the importance of teaching and research programmes in the social sciences, languages and arts domain. South Africa is entering a millennium of enormous societal, environmental and scientific challenges to which no university or scientific discipline can remain indifferent. The humanities, therefore, will have to position themselves anew within an evolving and transforming framework. Against the background of the new South Africa higher education institutional landscape and the changes in the external national and international environment, this article explores the challenges for an appropriate humanities. South Africa’s academics should not see this new environment as a threat, but as an opportunity for adaptation, adjustment and innovation. The changed environment offers the humanities opportunities and challenges to apply their very relevant knowledge and skills and to make valuable contributions to the scientific body of knowledge, to society and to the resources of the universities.

INTRODUCTION: ARE WE STILL WANTED?

For centuries the humanities and natural sciences were the two main pillars upholding the fundamental knowledge tradition of a university. Is this still the case? There are certain voices at present who regard the social sciences as being on the periphery of the scientific arena and therefore the loser in the ‘science wars’ (Flyvbjerg 2001). I am not suggesting that the humanities have become irrelevant and futile, but we should at least be willing to test their appropriateness in the framework of changing institutional rules and academic norms. Immediately the question is ‘appropriate for whom?’ Appropriateness in this context should be evaluated on the basis of three criteria: firstly, the academic relevance of the humanities’ disciplinary scientific base; secondly, their relevance for society and the job market; and thirdly, in terms of the higher education funding budget.

We all agree that a stronger focus on science, engineering and technology is
necessary to correct the present imbalances of student numbers and manpower needs in those fields. This, however, should not diminish the importance of teaching and research programmes in the social sciences, languages and arts domain. In the future development of societies we need more than technology – we need adjustments in human behaviour, attitudes and values to cope with the complex problems of humanity. I would like to make a case that the humanities still have an important role to play in this regard, both on the volatile continent of Africa and in the transforming South African environment. However, for the purpose of this discussion the humanities should not be seen merely within the context of a few narrowly defined academic disciplines, but it rather cuts through a wide spectrum of different disciplines. In this light Rossouw (1993) does see science as one academic culture, but he perceives this to be a culture that stands on two separate pillars and that it can only survive if both of these pillars are upheld. The humanities, with its procedures built on hermeneutic foundations, fulfil a supportive function for the cultural sphere of human development and communication, that is analogous to the function that the empirical analytical sciences fulfil in the cultural sphere of labor and technique. In this way both knowledge as virtue and knowledge as power are advanced. Wisdom and virtue should therefore be upheld as the goals of university education in shaping the inner self in spite of the outer world (Procter 1998). The following comments, embedded in a global context with generic applicability, lend support to this viewpoint:

- The social sciences and humanities have an essential role to play in helping our society to contemplate the past and envision the future as we make a range of difficult and important decisions in the present. Research and scholarship in these fields enrich our qualities of mind and spirit, nourish our creativity and strengthen our capacities for resilience and innovation. ‘They provide a major share of the analytical skills, basic and applied knowledge that we need to advance our quality of life – social, cultural, economic and intellectual – as we move into a new century’ (SSHRC Plan, Canada 1998).
- ‘A liberal arts and social science education can develop individuals who can think independently, ask significant questions, analyse and weigh ideas, draw logical conclusions and put forth sound arguments. These are precisely the skills business and industry are looking for. The days of the one-dimensional person are over’ (IBM Human Resources Division, Canada 1998).

South Africa is entering a millennium of enormous societal, environmental and scientific challenges to which no university or scientific discipline can remain indifferent. The humanities, therefore, also will have to position themselves anew within an evolving and transforming framework. The White Paper on Higher Education (1997) and subsequent Act (1997), as well as the National plan for higher education (2001), specify a specific set of goals, values and principles for all tertiary institutions as a norm for evaluating and planning their academic future.
In order to do this every higher education institution will have to gain clarity on the following issues:

- What are the salient goals and principles of the new South African higher education institutional landscape?
- Which realities and changes in the external national and international environment are relevant for the future repositioning of universities and their faculties?
- What is the expected profile of the future university environment as a result of these changes?
- What are the challenges for the humanities in South Africa within this new higher education context?

These questions also constitute the framework of this article as we now explore possible answers in the following sections.

**THE INSTITUTIONAL LANDSCAPE**

The challenge for all South African universities and academics at present is to redress past inequalities and to transform the higher education system to serve a new social order in meeting pressing national needs and budgets. The goals of the White Paper (1997) and National plan for higher education (2001) are clear in the following principles defined in the policy framework for the new higher education system:

- Promoting equity of access and fair chances of success to all who are seeking to realise their potential through higher education, while eradicating all forms of unfair discrimination and advancing redress of past inequalities;
- Meeting, through well-planned and coordinated teaching and research programmes, national development needs, including the high-skilled employment needs presented by a growing economy operating in a global environment;
- Supporting a democratic ethos and a culture of human rights through educational programmes and practices conducive to critical discourse and creative thinking, cultural tolerance, and a common commitment to a humane, non-racist and non-sexist social order;
- Contributing to the advancement of all forms of knowledge and scholarship, and in particular address the diverse problems and demands of the local, national and African contexts, and uphold rigorous standards of academic quality;
- Developing a single, national and coordinated higher education system, which is diverse in terms of the mix of institutional missions and programmes. This is the central goal. (National Plan for Higher Education 2001).
The question now for the humanities as a body of knowledge is whether they can fit into this framework? The White Paper on Higher Education (1997) demonstrates that they are indeed part of this scenario. Both the natural sciences and social sciences will have an opportunity to establish an academic niche in the higher education system, depending of course on their ability to adapt to the above principles:

The focus on science, engineering and technology programmes is necessary to correct present imbalances, in particular, the shortage of trained personnel in these fields. However, this will not diminish the importance of programmes in the social sciences and humanities which contribute to knowledge production, to the understanding of human development and social transformation. It also plays an important role in career-oriented training in a range of fields such as education, law, private and public sector management, social development and the arts. In addition, in the context of the communications and information revolution, the social sciences and humanities, as well as the sciences and technologies, must contribute to the development of the analytic, intellectual, cultural and ethical skills and competencies necessary for participation in the knowledge society (White Paper on Higher Education 1997).

REALITIES OF A CHANGING EXTERNAL ENVIRONMENT

Apart from the institutional changes mentioned above in which the humanities will have to function in future, there are broad national and international shifts taking place which may have an impact on the higher education system. Like universities in the rest of the world (Dearing 1997; Boyer 1998), South African universities also find themselves in a rapidly changing environment. This is evident from the following trends (University of Stellenbosch 1999a):

- The information and technological revolution: The information revolution has been experiencing an astonishing growth of new knowledge, as well as the speed with which it is disseminated. At the present rate the amount of available information doubles every five years, while the number of books in top libraries doubles every 14 years (Berry 1996). International competition and the globalisation of the world economy imply that the availability of and investment in information have become the main spurs to economic progress and in maintaining socio-political stability. The job market has changed to such an extent that new skills have become necessary and this will increasingly be the case in future. This has specific implications for universities and also for the humanities in South Africa. Academic disciplines should not respond stereotypically to the process, but manage the implications of the knowledge revolution in an agile and adaptable fashion.
Universities are increasingly being regarded as ‘incubators’ for industrial and technological innovations, rather than as bastions of culture. Work opportunities will in future change to such an extent that fewer people may have to be trained for bigger corporations and entrepreneurs who are able to create their own work opportunities should be concentrated on. The role of the lecturer is increasingly that of facilitating the functional accessing and ordering of information and contextualising knowledge for students. In this process certain kinds of knowledge can be accessed electronically without students necessarily having to enroll on campus for several years at considerable cost.

Technology, backed by computer innovation, is the key driving force to globalisation and economic development. This has specific implications for universities and for the humanities in that the duration, place and time of education become less relevant. Other consequences are massification of students, a new teaching culture which is more student-centered and less lecturer-directed, new methods of presentation (e.g., the e-campus with its electronic classrooms and satellite-driven distance learning), less face-to-face contact and a smaller bricks-and-mortar infrastructure. Increasing global alliances between foreign and local universities enhance the mobility of students and staff nationally and internationally.

- **Demographic tendencies:** The shift from a largely white elitist higher education system to a mass education system implies a fundamental change in the composition of the student population and staff profile. This, in turn, implies new learning needs of students from disadvantaged communities, and an inability of many students to pay for university studies. The age profile of the South African student population may also change significantly to that of an older group of students employed elsewhere, who can no longer spend an uninterrupted number of years on campus. The average age of graduates is expected to rise to 38 years in 2010 (Simkins 2002).

The National plan for higher education (2001) envisions a decrease in the humanities enrolment figures from the present 49 per cent to 40 per cent of the student population over the next five years. However, the potential number of students may increase in some of these fields, which are of strategic value. In spite of a national priority for more students in the natural sciences and technology, the majority of students from disadvantaged communities still opt for the social sciences.

- **Globalisation and postmodernism:** Globalisation involves a complex set of related processes that have served to enrich the interconnectedness of socio-cultural, political and economic life in a postmodern world (Short & Kim 1999). The concept is associated with the ease with which goods and
information cross international boundaries. Technological innovation has brought about a compression of the world and the intensification of people’s consciousness of the world as a whole. The impact of global forces varies over space, across time and between societies. The instantaneous transmission of images and information causes the world to ‘shrink’, which creates a kind of global localism. Simultaneously, the effects of postmodernism have led to an emphasis on human difference, uniqueness and individuality, which has sensitised us to the needs and situations of all members of societies. The effects of these developments are multiple. Universities and their faculties have to accommodate diversity and individuality in various forms, while grand theory is no longer the norm. Research and teaching in a postmodern society have to cater for global as well as localised needs in a different context of academic content and of student requirements.

● Competition and co-operation: University transformation world-wide entails the encouragement of greater competition for limited university resources. This means a decrease in the available teaching and research funds from the state budget. Stronger competition, therefore, is developing between universities, nationally and internationally and even within universities amongst faculties for students, staff, funds, infrastructure and other resources. Cost considerations will force us to merge certain institutions and to set up regional co-operation strategies or partnerships linking universities and their departments. The situation is further complicated by the fact that universities no longer have a monopoly on post-matric education and research. More involvement by the private and the public sector (so-called third-stream money) is taking place in the form of partnerships in the knowledge industry. Funders thus no longer give universities blank cheques – a clearly specified quid pro quo is required, i.e. career-oriented teaching and relevant research. More multidisciplinary teaching and research become necessary in an environment where shrinking resources have to be managed effectively and efficiently. A university or faculty can no longer be ‘all things to all people’ and hard choices will have to be made regarding their points of focus.

● Relevance of the academic offering: There is growing skepticism amongst taxpayers and other sources of finance regarding the efficiency of universities, leading to a questioning of the relevance of their teaching and research. Worldwide, universities are increasingly being criticised, on the one hand for not inculcating enough critical, analytical and synthetic thinking skills amongst students, but on the other hand for not imparting specific practical generic skills. Time for academic reflection and contemplation is becoming more and more limited. In reaction universities have raised questions about their primary role. Is the purpose of university teaching (1) cognitive development; (2) the transfer of cultural upliftment; (3) community service; (4) training for certain professions/careers; or (5) the promotion of academic disciplines with career skills only an incidental activity?
Corporate governance and finances: Worldwide there is increasing central government intervention regarding subsidies, diversity of student/staff composition, teaching/research foci and the accessibility of universities. New thinking is under way about financing formulas for South African universities on the basis of student places at various teaching levels and in study areas. In this respect the position of the humanities and social sciences may perhaps change in future in terms of a new ‘Student Place Matrix’ for the funding of disciplines and teaching programmes. In this process it may happen that universities, faculties and departments may have to be evaluated according to specific performance indicators and ranked according to their specific profiles.

EXPECTED PROFILE OF THE FUTURE UNIVERSITY ENVIRONMENT

Taking into account the institutional and broad national/international changes mentioned previously, the profile of university environments is in a process of transformation. At the same time the role of lecturers and researchers in the South African university environment (and in the humanities) is also in a dramatic state of flux, putting various demands on staff members (University of Stellenbosch 1999b). A few examples will illustrate the possible outcomes of this process.

● The individual academic becomes a multifaceted professional. The university lecturer’s task requires, apart from academic expertise, also other high-level skills: the ability to organise and facilitate effective study in a university context, to do excellent research, to act as entrepreneur, to think strategically, to perform appropriate community service, to utilise electronics, and to execute managerial and financial skills, and so forth.

● Teaching activities shift from formal lectures to a variety of teaching modes. The new programme-based higher education system emanates from a set of study and teaching activities and specifiable principles, of which outcomes, specific skills, coherence and focus are essential characteristics. In the past the primary aim of a lecture was to convey a specific set of subject contents to students. Now it is the task of lecturers rather to facilitate effective study in various ways, namely through self-study, tutorials and the use of electronic technology, while direct lecturing time is reduced. The lecturer has to organise and facilitate the teaching events in such a way that students acquire not only subject-specific knowledge, skills and attitudes, but also master understanding and an explicitly described set of generic skills.

● The learning environment becomes both full-time campus and part-time non-campus based. Different forms of distance learning make it possible for students to undertake university study even when they live in different places and in different circumstances. Thus students no longer have to be on campus full time. Traditional modes of teaching in combination with satellite-related interactive presentations and especially the Internet–Web are instrumental in
this development. The result is that the boundaries between distance education and residential education have become blurred on postmodern global campuses.

- Universities have to provide for both one-off learning and lifelong learning. Some students are still school-leavers as in the past who go to university for three or four years of full-time study. A large group of students, however, has become progressively older. They undertake supplementary study or refresher courses, are retrained or qualify themselves for a second career. In the past the career for which students studied was the job they practised for the duration of their working lives. These repeated learning experiences help students to function optimally in a changing global environment and a more adjustable work situation. Graduates possessing only a narrow set of single-subject skills are nowadays less well adapted to the demands of modern and postmodern professional life. Society and employers demand that graduates should know how to access information for themselves, how to think critically and integratively, how to take decisions, how to communicate effectively, etc.

- Academics must maintain both mono-disciplinary and multi-disciplinary expertise. Formerly the relevant criterion of a lecturers’ successful performance was his/her subject expertise. It is still expected of lecturers to be specialists in a particular field of knowledge, but it is also expected of them to work in an interdisciplinary way and to think more holistically than only in one discipline to solve the integrated and complex problems of our world. The number of new fields and specialities is growing by the day. In the face of an estimated 9 000 distinguishable fields of knowledge the need for interdisciplinary in university teaching and research is imperative. As disciplines become more diffuse, their boundaries become blurred. Synthesis and specialisation will have to operate in co-existence (van der Merwe & Bekker 2003).

- Lecturers are academically free but sensitive to societal needs. In the past academic freedom meant that lecturers were free to be guided only by the process of scientific enquiry in the free pursuit of truth and new scientific knowledge. Nowadays higher education is no longer seen as divorced from the broad economic, political and socio-cultural activities of society. The community and the government expect a more direct benefit from the work of academics and want them to respond more directly to the needs of society. We desperately need a clearer understanding of issues such as how perceptions, attitudes, values and beliefs are formed within society and how these affect the actions of human beings, individually and collectively. Human science research is fundamental to an in-depth understanding of the current transition in South Africa and the reconstruction and development of our society in the years to come.

**CHALLENGES FOR AN APPROPRIATE HUMANITIES IN SOUTH AFRICA**

Within the foregoing framework we could ask whether the humanities still have a contribution to make? Do they still matter? Faced with the awesome problems of
South Africa and its apartheid legacy – for instance, the insecurities and suffering bred by the glaring inequalities in social well-being and poverty, the desperate shortage of jobs and housing, the state of school education, the problems of AIDS and crime – are there more important matters to worry about? What will be required of graduates in the twenty-first century, therefore, are generic problem-solving skills, electronic data handling, informatics management, knowledge application abilities, networking and communication competencies, social sensitivity and above all, holistic and synthesising skills as presented by the social sciences, the languages and the arts. South Africa cannot afford not to be concerned with the humanities. Science and technology have to be tempered with the human element that the humanities offer. The real challenge is grounding science and technology in lived life, in the needs of our society and communities, in the management of change and transformation, in the development of the human spirit in a critical postmodern world. The need for this kind of knowledge is growing daily as the rapid societal changes confront us with new and unexpected issues which require constructive responses from the various decision makers.

In the process of dealing with these problems we have several options. The hard scientific approach to our study of human reality can be understood and driven in a way so narrow and rigid that it leaves no space for the riches, the unpredictability, the spontaneity and originality, or the surprises of the human spirit. In order to have a real impact on the science scene, the humanities should therefore not imitate the methodologies and approaches of the natural sciences and technology. The two types of science have their respective strengths and weaknesses in their respective fundamentally different dimensions and should be practised in a balanced way. The social sciences are strongest where the natural sciences are weakest. As the former have not contributed much to explanatory and predictive theory, so the natural sciences and technology have not contributed much to reflexive analysis regarding values and interests, which is the prerequisite for a dynamic political, economic and socio-cultural development strategy of any society. In this regard Flyvbjerg (2001) developed a conception of the social sciences based on a contemporary interpretation of the Aristotelian concept of ‘phronesis’ (practical wisdom and hermeneutical understanding). ‘Phronesis’ goes beyond scientific knowledge (episterne) and technical know-how (techne) and involves a distinctive mediation between the universal and the particular without a set of predetermined rules (Bernstein 1986:99). This implies the down-scaling of objective rule-based thinking for a more qualitative style, based on ethical considerations, rational values, intuition, experience and judgement of human life.

If social science is to be empowered, the fruitless efforts to emulate natural science’s success in producing cumulative and predictive theory should be dropped (Flyvbjerg 2001). Further, we must take up issues that matter to the local, national and global communities in which we live, and we must do this in ways that will make a difference to human beings. Also, we must effectively communicate the results of our research to the wider community and fellow citizens. If we do this,
we may successfully transform social science from what may become a sterile academic activity, undertaken mostly in isolation from a society on which it has little effect, and thus generate little appreciation outside the social sciences. We may transform the humanities into an activity also undertaken for the sake of the public, sometimes to clarify, sometimes to intervene, sometimes to generate new perspectives, and always to serve as eyes and ears in our ongoing efforts at understanding the present and deliberating about the future. We may, in short, arrive at a social science that really matters. The humanities represent an important counterpart to the scientific spirit of mankind in that it narrows the gap between facts and values, between things and meanings, between explanation and understanding, between knowledge-as-information and knowledge-as-interpretation.

Dramatic changes are taking place worldwide in the higher education systems within which the humanities must necessarily function. South Africa’s academics should not see these changes as a threat, but as an opportunity for adaptation, adjustment and innovation. The changed environment has offered the humanities opportunities and challenges to apply their very relevant knowledge and skills and to make valuable contributions to the scientific body of knowledge, to society and to the resources of the universities. Many university departments are in the process of restructuring their faculty positioning and teaching programmes to meet the challenges of a country in transition and of a South Africa which is finding its niche in the global community of nations. To achieve this goal, however, proactive planning, inter-disciplinary affiliation, international linkages, the appropriate academic training and high-quality research output on relevant themes are needed. It seems the humanities have a secure future in South Africa’s new higher education system, but in a different garment than in the past. The following actions may be relevant in fulfilling a more appropriate role in future:

- The humanities should accept their social and environmental responsibilities within the changing Southern African challenges in the midst of postmodern globalisation and the cry for relevance. At the same time we should aspire to the highest academic standards of excellence within the shrinking resources at our disposal, without losing sight of the expectations of the broad society. This means cultivating adaptability in an institutional and broad national/international environment that may soon look completely different again. In our present information and knowledge society we have to prepare students who may change careers several times in their lives, while many of the skills that we are teaching students at the moment may be obsolete within a few years. Faculties should be sensitive to changing market needs and career opportunities.
- We should co-operate with knowledge partners, because no scientific discipline can survive in academic isolation. Academics will have to discover fellow roleplayers in multi-disciplinary and regional contexts at universities and in the
public or private sector. We should be discipline orientated, but also remember that disciplinary boundaries become more and more fluid. Relevant departments and disciplines should consider common platforms in meaningful and practicable ways of sharing scarce resources with other universities, i.e. through regional co-operation by joint appointments, research teams and coordinated teaching programmes.

● The humanities perhaps require a renewed ‘phronesis’ approach to both local and global challenges that will afford us the opportunity of bringing our resources and skills into play in the exciting renaissance and the New Partnership for Africa’s Development (NEPAD) scenarios focusing specifically on sub-Saharan African needs. We should be innovative and not cling to worn-out ideas and methods in our faculties and within university structures. Let us make ourselves indispensable within the universities and the new higher education system. Everyone should find an answer to the question: Why should the social sciences, languages and arts be maintained in academic departments or disciplines at a specific university? Every humanities faculty or department should discover for itself a unique niche or ‘brand’ which makes it different from others nationally and internationally. Our survival depends upon a specific product which is needed by the market. Unnecessary overlapping and duplication at regional and national levels can harm our case.

● Academic scholarship should be sustained in teaching, research and community service. Continuous self-evaluation and external evaluation for all the departments are necessary to maintain academic quality and excellence, to ensure relevance and to promote international recognition. The Higher Education Quality Committee (HEQC) will be instrumental in overseeing this process during the next five years when audits of all higher education institutions will be executed according to a set of prescribed quality criteria (http://www.che.ac.za). Financial, academic and functional considerations have already necessitated a reduction in the number of universities, faculties, departments and staff in South Africa. Departments and faculties will have to re-align themselves strategically within these new structures in a framework of scarce resources.

● Whatever the circumstances, the research function of universities will not be scaled down in the new education dispensation. On the contrary, its importance can only increase, but with clear priorities and norms. Shrinking research funds and other resources require new ways of thinking and doing, namely, stronger interaction between research and postgraduate teaching; focused research priorities on selected themes related to societal and national needs; and team and interdisciplinary research programmes rather than individual ad hoc research projects. In this regard academics will be influenced very strongly in future by the National Research Foundation’s (NRF) rating system now also being applied to the humanities in South Africa.

● It should be emphasised that humanities’ role in higher education is not only
confined to stimulating ‘critical thinking’, but also in promoting research results and professionals in vital developmental areas of our country and continent, for example in urban studies (Geography and Sociology), studies in new forms of governance (Political Science and Public Management), translation and legal interpretation (Language Studies), cultural development and citizenship (History and the Arts). This means that a specific content of the disciplines in the humanities, not just its generic skills, is absolutely vital for our national transformation. The role of the humanities in training researchers in a variety of disciplines and multi-disciplinary areas should therefore be targeted. The country greatly needs such problem-solving expertise provided by the humanities.

In conclusion, the humanities have a definite niche and role in our postmodern world, as well as in South Africa’s new higher education environment – but probably within a different agenda than the present. We can create an exciting future for an appropriate humanities: appropriate for the conceptual base of the academic disciplines involved; appropriate for societal needs and job opportunities; appropriate for higher education’s financing formulas. We are indeed relevant and have a lot to offer. A university without a strong humanities pillar is not really a ‘universitas’: *Vita sine litteris mors est* (‘Life without letters is death’).

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