

# Research issues in the humanities and social sciences in Africa in the 21<sup>st</sup> Century: challenges and opportunities

Kgomotso H. Moahi<sup>1</sup>

Faculty of Humanities, University of Botswana, Botswana

Moahikh@mopipi.ub.bw

*This paper highlights the crucial role that research in the humanities and social sciences can and should play in policy making, business, innovation, etc. The paper also identifies the challenges faced by researchers in the humanities and social sciences and these include the continued marginalization of such research compared with research in the natural sciences disciplines; the relegation of humanities and social sciences theory and methodology; the lack of funding of research; the lack of time for researchers due to increased teaching loads and administration. Opportunities have been identified that can be seized to make research visible by ensuring that it answers the needs of society and policy makers, and that there is more collaboration, partnership and interdisciplinary research. The paper also draws upon the experience at the University of Botswana.*

**Keyword:** Humanities; Social Sciences; Research; Research funding; Research Issues; Africa, Botswana

## Introduction

This paper seeks to identify the challenges that face researchers in the humanities and social sciences in Africa. By so doing one is not assuming that conditions in all the countries of Africa are the same, and wherever possible, differences will be highlighted. The intention is also to highlight opportunities that we as African researchers in the humanities and social sciences can exploit to make our mark and presence felt in the knowledge economy/society. The paper will also refer to initiatives taken by the University of Botswana towards making the university research intensive.

In discussing research issues in the humanities and social sciences, the paper will be based on the author's experience at the University of Botswana. The definition of research used at the University of Botswana (UB) is as follows:

*"Research is to be understood as original investigation undertaken in order to gain knowledge and understanding. It includes work of direct relevance to the needs of commerce, industry, and to the public and voluntary sectors; scholarship; the invention and generation of ideas, images, performance, artefacts including design, where these lead to new or substantially improved insights; and the use of existing knowledge in experimental development to produce new or substantially improved materials, devices, products and processes, including design and construction"* (www.rae.ac.uk).

The 21<sup>st</sup> Century is seen as synonymous with globalization and its impact on institutions of research. Research institutions such as universities now have to prove their worth by addressing labor market demands as well as demands for research that has societal and developmental impact. Universities find themselves in an environment where there is never enough money, especially for research and there is need for the universities to generate third stream funding through consultancies and contract research and other means. For the humanities and social sciences research, funding has become even more of an issue and this is exacerbated by calls, especially in developed countries that in order to obtain funding, researchers must show that their research has had an impact one way or the other. Furthermore, the African Union has adopted the view that emphasis in higher education must be in the so-called S&T areas, because further development is expected to be driven almost solely by science and technology, to the exclusion of other disciplines such as the social sciences and the humanities. While there is merit in emphasizing science and technology, universities are duty bound to remain universal in terms of the scope of their knowledge production. Here in South Africa, it has been demonstrated that combining former technikons with universities is the best way to illustrate the justification for a comprehensive form of knowledge generation for the 21<sup>st</sup> century knowledge economy (Tracy Bailey et al, 2010). The knowledge economy as we know it today is very much ICT based. And ICT brings together the natural and the social sciences.

The humanities and social sciences are academic disciplines dedicated to the study of society, the economy, business, governance, history and culture (LSE Public Policy Group, 2008). Research conducted in these disciplines enables an understanding of the human condition, of society, and of changes occurring in society and how they affect humans.

1. Kgomotso Moahi, PhD, is Associate Professor in the Department of Library and Information Studies and Dean Faculty of Humanities, University of Botswana, Botswana.

Despite this, the role of humanities and social science research tends to go largely unrecognized and undervalued. Discussions of the “knowledge society” tend to focus on science and technology research as the way to build and develop nations towards becoming knowledge societies. The role that humanities and social sciences can play in innovation; policy making; business and economy; and in addressing societal problems are not generally recognized by humanities and social sciences researchers themselves, their institutions and, society. Some humanities researchers are of the opinion that humanities research cannot be applied research the way that social science research can be and that it is predominantly basic research. This view is held despite the fact that innovation and commercialization processes include book writing as well as the development of media technologies which are based on social science and humanities disciplines.

That humanities and social sciences research is important should not in any way be in doubt, but efforts need to be made to ensure that their role and contribution is understood not only by us, but also by researchers in other disciplines, as well as policy makers, business and industry, etc. More importantly, the need for interconnectedness of various disciplines in producing knowledge of different types is something that must never be taken for granted or overlooked. For example, the innovation value chain may begin with pure sciences but at the point of commercialization, or taking the product to the market, it is the business expertise that becomes critical.

### **Why is humanities and social science research important?**

Before we proceed to consider issues, we need to remind ourselves why and in what ways humanities and social sciences research is important.

Wright (2007) states that the humanities, and by extension humanities research, are important because they enable an understanding of what makes us human and enables us to handle change that is a constant in our lives and which is accelerated by scientific discovery and technology. Further, the Nairobi Report of 2009 states that the humanities and social sciences are critical for development:

*“the perspective and knowledge which they offer on history, culture, social interactions, political systems, economics, and much more are vital to development and well being ... it is only by engaging with history and its expressions through literature and performance that communities and nations are able to understand and reflect on their origins, to understand their past and define their place in the world”* (Nairobi Report, 2009:6).

Humanities and social science research also has an important role to play in the innovation system, just as much as research in science and technology (Bakhshi, et al, 2008). Contrary to conventional belief, the natural sciences, the humanities and social sciences are complementary and provide a broad way of considering innovation, its impact and acceptability to society. The relationship between these areas is not hierarchical as might be suggested by the funding opportunities and general belief that innovation can only be driven by knowledge generated in science and technology research. Whilst science and technology research might generate innovation, it is humanities and social science research that will ask fundamental questions about the acceptability of an innovation and therefore inform the public and thus address the social and ethical dimensions of an innovation (Mette, 2008). The public is not only interested in the technical scientific facts but the wider implications of the technology as well. The humanities and social sciences provide the avenue for a critical assessment of any innovation in order to inform the public such that they can make informed judgment.

Humanities and social sciences research also has a role to play in business and in generating income as shown by the results of a DEA study carried out in Denmark. The study surveyed 100 companies about their challenges and needs to which H&SS research could help provide solutions. The results came up with 7 themes which H&SS researchers could consider.

Research in the humanities and social sciences has an impact on policy makers and the public because it can contribute to an understanding of the human and social side of any phenomenon. As such, research should, therefore, inform policy making. However, such research does not receive much attention in general; humanities research, in particular, is viewed as research into esoteric issues that have no bearing on real life. According to the British Academy Report (2008), the full value of humanities and social sciences research has yet to be realized by policy-makers. This is because they may not be aware of the available research and humanities and social science researchers may not have the networks that would make their research known. What is therefore needed is a link for dialog and exchange.

A visit to the Human Sciences Research Council (HSRC) website in South Africa shows the kinds of research projects undertaken in the human and social sciences area. The research speaks to the needs of South Africa, and indeed other African countries in that it focuses on the areas that require more understanding in for them to be addressed. Such areas include education; poverty, employment and growth; service delivery; child, youth, family and social development; democracy and governance; education, science and skills development; knowledge systems; social aspects of HIV and

AIDs, etc. Further, if one considers the millennium development goals (MDGs), one sees that to tackle the challenges that face African and other developing areas in the world, there is need for concerted effort to conduct research in a holistic manner that links the humanities, social sciences and science and technology. In this interrelationship, the humanities and social sciences have the potential to help us understand why there is so much poverty, why there is disease and illness, and why democracy seems to be such an elusive concept in Africa, and what can be done. Yet, we see that such potential is not realized because it would appear that the research that has been conducted in problematic areas has not had the impact which would be manifest in policies that address the issues. Pohoryles and Schadauer (2009) state that there is discrepancy between the potential importance of humanities and social sciences research/knowledge and the comparative low attention they receive from policy makers, other research communities, and the public as a whole. How do the humanities and social sciences intellectuals and researchers act to address this conundrum? Why is it the case anyway? There are many reasons for this which shall be discussed below. As it shall become evident, misconceptions often arise because of the failure of some scholars to notice the multifaceted linkage between the knowledge base and the knowledge outcomes.

### Research challenges

Research is generally classified as either basic research or applied research. Each type of research has its time and merits, and therefore there is none that has supremacy over the other. What is important is that any researcher should endeavor to strike some balance in the type of research that is undertaken. It is a good idea to pursue research in one's own interest, but also be engaged in research that is applicable to some challenge or need in society. It is likewise not a problem to undertake desk research but also prudent to also undertake empirical research. In other words, the critical thing is to develop the mind of a well rounded researcher, as opposed to merely delving into specific research. Researchers in the humanities have been accused of undertaking more desk than empirical research. Colleagues in the Humanities state that they do not need much by way of funding because they can do their research in the library or in the archives, or that raising research funding should not be a requirement for promotion because they can conduct research without access to funds. It is the author's view that those colleagues are focusing more on "ivory tower" type of research instead of also finding ways of addressing topical issues such as climate change, HIV and AIDS, gender based violence, and so many others that require an understanding of human behavior and how it contributes to such issues and what can be done. In addition, academics need funding to run their graduate programmes and have graduate students. This includes academics in the humanities and the social sciences. Sawyerr's vision for African research is the "*sustained indigenous generation of world class research results and new knowledge that helps our understanding of African conditions and contribute to the advancement of its people*" (Swayrr 2004:216). The research must be determined by the African researchers themselves and be relevant to the local context. As different nations in the continent of Africa, we have specific challenges that require research to understand and address. Researchers in the humanities and social sciences are better placed to do this because of their focus on the human condition and their interpretative abilities. The value of this research is more visible only after the research outcomes from the humanities are applied elsewhere in the knowledge development chain, including the application of science and technology.

Research in the humanities is considered by many to be totally different from that of the natural sciences in terms of theory and methodology. Claims are made that humanities are not part of what is called "the sciences", especially history and the literary studies since they are exclusively based on textual sources. Humanities research is seen as lacking the rigor that is present in the natural sciences – it is a "soft" science, where a researcher can closet himself/herself in the archives and call that research. Thus there is talk of the "two cultures" – and the term dominates the organization of disciplines in universities and drives the distribution of most national research funding (Arthur, 2009). These views are held by policy makers, the public and the natural scientists themselves, as well as some researchers in the humanities. However, research in the humanities and social sciences does not have to adhere to the "lofty" ideals of research in the natural sciences. There is instead need for close collaboration with the natural sciences because the different types of approaches contribute to a multidimensional solving of research problems. Peyraube (2005) gives an example of research in human cloning and states that "*science today must be accompanied by profound thinking on morals and ethics, domains whose matrix is the humanities*" (Peyraube, 2005:2), and social sciences. Issues such as human cloning cannot be the preserve of natural scientists alone, but also require the input of the humanities and social sciences. The research ethics which underpins such research cannot be limited to either type of research but is all-embrative, thereby underscoring the need to focus on the knowledge continuum when engaging in research for development, scholarship and knowledge generation.

Sawyerr (2004) discusses the challenge of research capacity in Africa and states that research capacity includes individual skills; the quality of the research environment; funding, infrastructure, and the time available to the researcher.

These frame a broad discussion of research capacity in Africa and one might add factors that are specific to the humanities and social sciences that include the lone wolf mentality of these researchers, and their own perception of the value and usefulness of their research. A point is made that the individual skills can only be gained by doing – i.e. there is need for staff to engage in research, and in particular, for junior scholars to work in teams with senior scholars to facilitate the learning and honing of skills. However, to do this, there is a requirement for research funding and the absence of such can only lead to compartmentalized research activities and a situation where staff focus on commissioned and consultancy research to the detriment of the development of research capacity, especially in junior scholars. The point made above calls for the need for planning in conducting research. And this leads to the need for the development of a Research Strategy, something that shall be addressed in some depth later.

The research environment is also equally important. Universities or institutions of higher education are inextricably bound to the environment. This means that the trends in higher education do have an impact on what universities do. Indeed African research is still reeling from underfunding of African universities that resulted from the World Bank pronouncements that focus needed to be directed towards basic education as it would yield a better rate of return than higher education. According to the Nairobi Report of 2009, African research community faces challenges such as decline in funding, insufficient investment in basic infrastructure, falling incomes and increases in undergraduate enrolments. Higher education is required to increase access and participation – with the resultant increase in student numbers, and not necessarily accompanied by increased resources. Increasingly, academic staff are required to take on administrative duties as well, and this leaves very little time for research. From the point of view of my own university where teaching loads are significantly high and all staff are expected to provide service to the university, profession, as well as community – this does not leave much time for research. Meaningful research can only be conducted in the long vacation (May to August), but there are other responsibilities such as industry attachment supervision and others that also make a demand on academic staff time.

Disciplines in the humanities in particular are seen as having “*an unfortunate tendency towards isolation leading to atomized and fragmented research, given their strong emphasis on the role of the individual researchers*” (Peyraube, 2005:3). Research collaboration is the buzzword in research and it may take different forms. It is possible for researchers from the same discipline to work together and this has the advantage that the researchers have more or less a common set of concepts, methods and language to interpret the world (Morton, 2010). Disciplinary collaboration also lends itself to mentoring of junior scholars thus ensuring that they practice research and develop their capacity. Collaboration can also be multi-disciplinary where researchers from more than one discipline work together to address a common question. Interdisciplinarity is touted as the way to go in order to tackle a common problem. Here researchers from more than one discipline join to create a new conceptual framework and adapt or modify their disciplinary approaches to tackle a common problem (Morton, 2010). Finally, there is trans-disciplinarity where interdisciplinary researchers collaborate with non-academic professionals, practitioners and nongovernmental organizations to come up with solutions for large problems faced by societies. Clearly, therefore, if we are to bring our particular disciplinary strengths to research problems, we do need to pay attention to working with other disciplines on research problems that are relevant.

Neo-liberal economic policies have informed market orientation for universities. Universities are expected to produce job ready graduates in the areas of need in the labor market. Universities are also expected to generate third stream income through consultancies and commissioned research; universities are also expected to show the social and economic impact of their research (Shepherd, 2009), something which humanities researchers in the UK feel very uncomfortable with, and no doubt researchers in our parts of the world would also feel uncomfortable about too. That discomfort may be caused by the difficulties entailed in demonstrating impact, but also by the perception that this in a sense takes away the academic freedom and latitude of researchers. Further, some universities, such as UB has made the generation of research funding a condition for promotion to professorial levels – thus exerting more pressure on humanities and social sciences researchers to source funding themselves rather than expect the university to provide research funding.

There are humanities and social sciences research councils in many developed countries and in South Africa, but not in very many African countries. In saying this, the author is aware that a number of research councils in South Africa may not be funding entities in the way that, for instance, the UK research councils are. However, the fact that a number of them are funding entities does mean that they can augment research that is available for academics in higher education. Nevertheless, one still notices a lack of funding for humanities and social sciences research in comparison to other disciplines in the natural sciences. Whilst there are international organizations that fund research, the charge against them has been that they determine research agendas for researchers. Further, the extensive requirements of donors in grant proposals are more of a deterrent than an encouragement for most researchers.

## Research opportunities

The British Academy (2008) elaborates on what the Humanities and Social Sciences researchers must do to ensure that their research makes an impact.

First, they must find out what the policy makers need in order to influence policy and make decisions. One of the major factors to bear in mind is that no one problem can be addressed in a one-sided way; there is need for an integrated approach drawing on the expertise of scientists, business, as well as humanities and social sciences. A typical example of such a problem is HIV and AIDS where there is also need to consider behavior as well as the science of producing a vaccine or drugs that will lessen the impact of having HIV in one's body. I recall a statement made some years ago by a Botswana Government Minister that researchers did not produce research that impacted policy. There are so many issues that plague African societies and economies such as the effects of globalization, economic prosperity, social justice, distribution of wealth and opportunity, climate change, public sector reforms, health, etc that could benefit from humanities and social science researchers working together and with other disciplines.

Thus, in order to understand what policy makers need, researchers must understand and appreciate the needs and problems of society. In this way, they can be in a position to conceptualize the problems and how to go about addressing them through research. This means being attuned to what is happening and what the topical and even not so topical issues are, that require knowledge injection. Although one is not advocating that the humanities and social sciences research limits itself to research that is deemed relevant only, there is need for researchers to make the value of their work clear by contributing to policy making. This would no doubt, increase the standing of the humanities and social science disciplines in the eyes of policy makers as well as potential students who at present are seeing more future in the sciences and business areas of study.

A visit to the Human Sciences Research Council (HSRC) web site in South Africa shows the kinds of research projects undertaken in the various centers. These areas are at the heart of issues that African governments are dealing with in order to foster the development of their economies and countries. There are many issues besetting African countries that include war, conflict and strife, poverty, educational quality, HIV and AIDS, gender based violence, child soldiers, corruption, etc. All these areas could benefit from research carried out by the arts, humanities and social sciences.

Humanities and social sciences researchers also need to understand and appreciate what they have to offer. As stated earlier, researchers in these disciplines can be their very own enemies in how they perceive their research – according to Van Langehove, (2007), *“social sciences and humanities need a basic shift of their paradigm to ensure the future of the disciplines. Traditional social sciences and humanities produce knowledge in an academic career path that forces the researcher to stay in his/her own discipline”*. Indeed it is important that these researchers appreciate that they have a role to play.

There is need for close collaboration with the natural sciences (Peyraube, 2005). *“science today has to be accompanied by profound thinking on morals and ethics, domains whose matrix is the humanities”*. An example is human cloning which cannot be dealt with by science alone, but has to be examined and interrogated from a humanistic and social perspective as it would no doubt affect the social and human fabric of life as we know it. *“Humanities researchers today are engaged in collaboration with researchers in life sciences and medicine, in ICT, in earth sciences, and even in physics and chemistry”* (Payraube, 2005:3). Collaboration with other disciplines can be encouraged in a number of ways. However, at the University of Botswana, two initiatives are currently being implemented or in the process of beginning implementation: the first is the establishment of research centers and institutions such as: Centre for Scientific Research on Indigenous Knowledge (CESRIKI); Centre for Tourism; Centre for HIV/AIDS Studies; Centre for Strategic Studies; Centre for San Studies; Centre for Renewable Energy; Harry Oppenheimer Research Centre (HOORC) which has just become an Institute. The idea is that these centers be interdisciplinary in nature, and with such structures it is easy to see how the collaboration between the disciplines can be effected. The second initiative is one still in the making, and that is the reorganization of the academic structure to facilitate interdisciplinarity in both teaching and research. The idea is to break down the silos that we academics have a natural affinity for and dismantle departments and have instead schools with programs as opposed to departments. Granted, interdisciplinarity will not occur simply because structures have changed, but there should also be other ways and means to motivate for behavior change.

Continuing with the need for collaboration, there is need for African researchers to be better connected with each other. In discussions of collaboration, the south-south dimension is often overlooked in favor of north-south collaboration. According to the Nairobi Report (2009), since very few African institutions have the capacity to support a full program in humanities and social sciences research, there is need for institutional collaboration that will serve to leverage whatever resources individual institutions have and pool these together.

The 21<sup>st</sup> Century has seen further development of ICTs and the concept of digital scholarship. Arthur, (2009) writes about the marriage between humanities research and technology. He states that the digital environment has thrown the humanities and technology together in a way that has facilitated collaboration hitherto unheard of. Nowadays we hear of

e-humanities or digital humanities where large corpus of text and images are digitized and are available for research in completely new ways that bring different disciplines together. Technology has formed a bridge that can enhance collaboration between disciplines. This development is discussed here to show that there are many ways in which interdisciplinary collaboration can be achieved. The University of Botswana has developed a strong Digital Scholarship initiative for the purpose of enhancing computer literacy and digital application consonant with the institution's desire to be globally visible. Even our research management is now perfecting the Research Management System (RMS) which is based on the South African model, and the Digital Archive, which it is using for promoting the visibility of its research outputs. It must be stressed, at the expense of being repetitive, that these technological tools do not fall within any subject – they are subject neutral, so to speak. Humanities is as much a part of this process as is any other field.

We only have to borrow a leaf from the developed countries to see how best we could overcome, or at least mitigate the problem of inadequate funding for research in our universities. Both the developed and the developing countries are agreed that higher education lies at the core of development. The difference, however, is in the role that the university(ies) must play in the national development programme. Developed countries make full use of their universities, while developing countries, especially those in Africa, do not integrate their universities in their national development agendas and programmes. The point here is that developed countries fund their universities in order to get them to deliver on the national development mandate, and through such funding, the research agenda of the university is advanced and national resources are thus optimally invested. By contrast, the African university receives from the government only the meager funding that comes as the government subvention. Funding of higher education through a development structure that brings the university and the government together would cover all areas of disciplines, and thus mitigate the difference in the funding levels between the humanities and social sciences on the one hand, and the natural sciences on the other. This is where the real difference lies between the two approaches.

On a positive note there are a number of initiatives that provide possibilities for funding research in the humanities and social sciences. One that comes to mind is the National Working Groups call for proposals from CODESRIA. The call for proposals states that researchers can mobilize themselves to form a working group around a topic of their choice. The purpose of such an initiative is promote research and publication on matters pertinent to national groups and provide humanities and social science researchers the opportunity access funding for research. Recently the European Commission held a conference in Ethiopia on social science and humanities research aimed at exploring collaborative work between African and European scholars. The EU has supported socio-economic science and the humanities research over the last 4 framework projects. According to the EU social science and humanities research “*contributes to an in-depth, shared understanding of the complex, and interrelated socio-economic challenges facing Europe and the rest of the world*”. However, one notes that there is a preponderance of international funding agencies over local African ones. This may of course mean that the research agenda is largely driven by the donors, and is something that we must be aware of and try to ensure that the research that is funded resonates with the issues that we face as African nations. In other words, there is need to evaluate the impact of the research that is funded through international donors on our communities before taking on the funding.

One of the problems highlighted in the Nairobi Report (2009) is the fact that the future of research lies in the development of junior scholars to ensure that there is continuation as senior scholars retire. Thus one of the recommendations is to invest in the early research career of junior scholars. This entails providing mentorship and encouraging junior scholars to take up post doctoral opportunities.

### **Towards building a research intensive university: the case of the University of Botswana**

The University of Botswana has developed a research strategy that clearly encompasses all the research disciplines and urges for interdisciplinary research. The academic structure is in the process of being re-organized to make it more amenable to interdisciplinary teaching and research.

In its strategic plan entitled “A strategy for excellence”, the University of Botswana has set itself the goal of being a research intensive university by 2021. As such, a University Research Strategy has been developed and is being implemented as a way of laying the ground towards that goal. The goals are identified as:

- To increase staff participation in research;
- To increase and enhance student research training;
- To increase internal and external research funding;
- To increase international collaborative research;
- To increase the volume and quality of research outputs
- To enhance the impact of research; and
- To improve the integration of research and teaching.

A number of research themes have been identified based on the following criteria: existing areas of research strengths; national research priorities; international trends in research; and emerging societal needs and new research areas. The following identified themes require inter-disciplinary collaborator research:

- Culture, the arts and society;
- Economic diversification and entrepreneurship;
- Environmental systems and natural resources management;
- Health research
- Indigenous knowledge systems
- Minerals, water and energy research;
- Social and political development.

Clearly, the institutional platform has been laid out at the University of Botswana that would enable the humanities and social science researchers to make their mark and participate in research that will bring them to the fore.

## Conclusion

This paper has highlighted the crucial role that research in the humanities and social sciences can and should play in policy making, business, innovation, etc. The paper has also identified the challenges faced by researchers in the humanities and social sciences and these include the continued marginalization of such research compared with research in the natural sciences disciplines; the relegation of humanities and social sciences theory and methodology; the lack of funding of research; the lack of time for researchers due to increased teaching loads and administration. Opportunities have been identified that can be seized to make research visible by ensuring that it answers the needs of society and policy makers, and that there is more collaboration, partnership and interdisciplinary research. It is hoped that this paper has succeeded in demonstrating the dangers of considering humanities and the social sciences separately from natural sciences when we consider the knowledge generation process. It is also hoped that the paper has given sufficient attention to the natural inseparability of disciplines, and more importantly that the future, which is anchored on the knowledge economy, is for all disciplines, humanities and social sciences included.

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