



**Comment on the Draft Regulations for the
Establishment of a National Institute for the
Humanities and Social Sciences**

July 2013

1. Introduction

- 1.1 The Minister of Higher Education and Training has indicated his intention to “make Regulations” in terms of the Higher Education Act, 1997 (Act No 101 of 1997), as amended, and has published draft regulations for the establishment of a National Institute for the Humanities and Social Sciences (NIHSS) in the Government Gazette, Notice No. 441, Government Gazette No. 36584 of 19 June 2013.
- 1.2 The Council welcomes the opportunity to comment on the draft Regulations in terms of section of 38A (1) of the Higher Education Act, which stipulates that the Minister may establish a National Institute for Higher Education “after consultation with the Council on Higher Education”.
- 1.3 The Council is concerned, however, that its ability to comment is constrained by the fact that the Regulations are not accompanied by a policy statement indicating the rationale for the establishment of the NIHSS. The Council is aware that the establishment of the NIHSS is informed by the recommendations in the *Report Commissioned by the Minister of Higher Education and Training for the Charter for Humanities and Social Sciences* (DHET, Final Report: 30 June 2011). However, an accompanying policy statement would have clarified the Ministry’s response to the Final Report and to the public comments on the Final Report that were submitted to the Department of Higher Education and Training by various role-players and stakeholders.
 - 1.3.1 In addition, a policy statement would have clarified the Ministry’s view of the concept of a National Institute in general given that the proposed NIHSS is significantly different in purpose and structure from the existing National Institutes for Higher Education in Mpumalanga and the Northern Cape.

2. The Status of the Humanities and the Social Sciences

- 2.1 The Council understands and takes as its starting point that the establishment of the NIHSS is informed by the perceived “crisis” of the humanities and social sciences as reflected in the Final Report and the Academy of Science of South Africa (ASSAf) *Consensus Study on the State of the Humanities in South Africa: Status, prospects and strategies* (August 2011). This perceived “crisis” as the ASSAf study indicates, is global:

“In many parts of the world concern has been expressed over the diminishing role which the Humanities are playing in the so-called ‘knowledge chain’. These worries have pointed specifically to the weakening place of the Humanities within the academy, and more generally, a deepening disregard of the Humanities in society.” (ASSAf, 2011:14)

It was precisely this concern, that is, that the “humanities and social sciences were being neglected and becoming weaker” that prompted the Minister to commission the *Report on Charter for the Humanities and the Social Sciences* (Foreword: 7). The Council welcomes the Minister’s initiative in commissioning the Report and the opportunity it has provided for a broader debate on the role of the humanities and the social sciences in the context of the national development agenda.

2.2 The Council agrees with the Minister that “while it is debatable whether the humanities and social sciences (HSS) in South African universities is in crisis, it is clear that, on the whole, it could and should be a lot stronger in order to play the role it could be playing in the development of our society, our economy and our intellectual life”. (Foreword: 7).

2.2.1 In the Council’s view, and as the Minister points out, in the view of many in the academy, the perceived “crisis” of the humanities and social sciences is in part the result of government policies - the “narrowing down of the role of the Humanities in the National System of Innovation” (ASSAf: 44), the public messages – understandable in the context of the apartheid legacy, emphasising the importance of science, engineering and technology for economic development, and institutional practices informed by (mistaken) interpretations of the impact of the higher education funding framework on enrolments in the humanities and social sciences.

2.2.2 The privileging of science, engineering and technology in public messages and science and technology policy adversely impacted on individual and institutional behaviour in the late 1990s and early 2000s as reflected in declining headcount enrolments in the humanities and social sciences – from 273 000 in 1996 to 175 000 in 2002. This decline occurred despite a more balanced approach to the humanities and social sciences in the development of higher education policy, as stated in *Education White Paper 3: A Programme for the Transformation of Higher Education*:

“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, in particular, to the understanding of social and human development, including social transformation. They also play 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” (DoE, 1997: #2.25).

This was re-affirmed in the *National Plan for Higher Education*, which

argued that enrolments in the humanities and social sciences (including education) should be pegged at 40% of total headcount enrolments. This was informed by the view that the humanities and social sciences play an important role in amongst others, a range of “career-oriented programmes such as education, law, private and public sector management, social development and the arts”; advance “understanding of social and human development, including social transformation” and contribute to the “development of a common sense of nationhood” (DoE, 2001: 30). The clear statement pegging the share of humanities and social science enrolments (including education) at 40% of total headcount enrolments seems to have contributed to a reversal in the decline in enrolments from a low of 175 000 in 2002 to 220 326 in 2011.

Similarly, in the case of doctoral studies, although as Johan Mouton points out, “the number of first time doctoral students has flattened off in recent years, the overall number of doctoral graduates increased significantly between 2000 and 2010” (Mouton, 2011: 3).

As far as research output is concerned, there is little evidence that the humanities and social sciences are in crisis. While output in the humanities and social sciences has fluctuated in recent years, this has remained within a 5% range. Despite this, the humanities and social sciences continue to publish at a high rate relative to the staff complement. In 2010, humanities and social science staff constituted 35% of the overall staff complement and were responsible for 39% of the total research output. This compares positively with both SET and Business and Commerce where staff to output ratios were 57%: 55% and 8%: 6% respectively. Furthermore, it must be noted that the humanities and social sciences were responsible for 85% of the book publications in 2010, which have been under-weighted in comparison with other outputs such as journal articles and conference proceedings. When the full value of these book publications is taken into account, the humanities and social sciences’ proportion of output will grow accordingly.

2.2.3 In this context, the need to focus on and strengthen the humanities and social sciences is important not because there is a “crisis” but because the institutional and societal culture may not be supportive and nurturing of the humanities and social sciences. As the point of departure of the ASSAf study indicates:

“the Humanities are indispensable, producing an essential set of analytical skills, along with bodies of knowledge without which our society, and the wider world, would be inscrutable. It is the Humanities that nurture the intellectual lifeblood of a democratic project through powers of informed analysis, judgement and creative critique”.
(ASSAf: 14)

2.2.4 However, although the Council agrees with the ASSAf study, the need to strengthen the humanities and social sciences should not lead to

reinforcing the artificial schism between “big science” on the one hand and the humanities and social sciences on the other. The point is that the non-humanist technocrat is as serious a threat to democracy as the humanities and social sciences graduate who is ignorant of the sciences and its impact on human development.

3. The NIHSS as a Solution for Strengthening the Humanities and Social Sciences

3.1 The Council agrees that the strengthening of the humanities and social sciences requires a range of interventions broadly along the lines identified in the Final Report and the ASSAf Study. These interventions, some of which are already in place but may need strengthening and others which are new, include, amongst others, the need for targeted postgraduate funding at the masters and doctoral level; establishment of research chairs and centres of excellence; facilitating national, regional, continental and international research networks; advancing research in under-researched fields such as the proposed catalytic projects; and encouraging the broadening of the undergraduate curriculum to ensure that all students are exposed to some study of the humanities and the social sciences.

3.2 The key issue is whether the proposed solution, that is, the establishment of the NIHSS, is the appropriate intervention for addressing the identified challenges.

3.3 In the Council’s view, the function and efficacy of the proposed NIHSS has to be considered in the light of the role and function of existing statutory structures whose functions are not dissimilar to those delineated for the proposed NIHSS, namely, the Human Sciences Research Council (HSRC), the National Research Foundation (NRF), and to a lesser extent, the Academy of Science of South Africa (ASSAf).

3.3.1 The core function of the NIHSS, that is, to facilitate “collaboration and co-ordination of the work of higher education institutions”, specifically, the promotion of research, including in catalytic projects, the granting of scholarships, the building of research networks and joint projects both nationally and continentally, are all functions provided for in the mandates of the HSRC, the NRF and ASSAf, as indicated below:

(i) The HSRC was established in terms of the preamble to the Human Sciences Research Council Act, 2008 (Act No 17) to:

- “promote human science research of the highest quality in South Africa in order to improve understanding of social conditions and the processes of social change;
- enable “members of the South African human sciences community” to fulfil their obligation to “engage with their

colleagues elsewhere in Africa and the rest of the world through networks and joint programmes of research on pressing social issues relevant to human welfare and prosperity” (HSRC Act: 2).

- (ii) The NRF was established “to support and promote research through funding, human resource development and the provision of the necessary research facilities in order to facilitate the creation of knowledge, innovation and development in all fields of science and technology, including indigenous knowledge and thereby to contribute to the improvement of the quality of life of all the people of the Republic.”
- (iii) The objectives of ASSAf, which was established in terms of ASSAf Act, 2001 (Act No 67) are:
 - (a) “to promote common ground in scientific thinking across all disciplines, including the physical, mathematical and life sciences, as well as human, social and economic sciences;
 - (b) to encourage and promote innovative and independent scientific thinking;
 - (c) to promote the optimum development of the intellectual capacity of all people;
 - (d) to provide effective advice and facilitate appropriate action in relation to the collective needs, opportunities and challenges of all South Africans; and
 - (e) to link South Africa with scientific communities of the highest levels, in particular within the Southern African Development Community, the rest of Africa and internationally.”

3.3.2 The functions of the NIHSS that are not directly included in the mandate of the HSRC, the NRF and ASSAf are those relating to teaching and learning, specifically, advancing learning, dynamising teaching, developing curriculum, and strengthening a student-centred culture, as well as the advisory function.

3.3.2.1 The teaching and learning functions are, however, core functions of universities and remain their responsibility. They are institution-specific, and as the Green Paper on Post-School Education and Training states in relation to curriculum development (but which is equally applicable to the other functions listed):

“In higher education, curricula are the responsibility of individual institutions. This is appropriate and should remain” (GP 2012: 77).

And more importantly, these functions cut across disciplinary boundaries and fields, that is, they speak to the academic

project as a whole and not only to the humanities and social sciences. This should not be interpreted to mean that there is no role for initiatives that support and promote the enhancing of quality in teaching and advancing such as the ASSAf study recommendation to introduce “a broad-based Humanities curriculum, ideally in an interdisciplinary core study programme for undergraduates, which exposes all university students to some study of the Humanities” (ASSAf: 134). However, this should take the form of highlighting best practice and supporting pilot initiatives at the institutional level.

3.3.2.2 The advisory function assigned to the proposed NIHSS, which includes not only advising the Minister on “matters relating to its specific scope or application” but also advice on “higher education generally” overlaps with the mandate of the Council on Higher Education. A key function of the CHE in terms of the section 5(1)(a) of the Higher Education Act, which it has performed since its establishment and continues to do, is to “advise the Minister on any aspect of higher education at the request of the Minister”. This, notwithstanding, it is not at all clear why a body focussing on the humanities and social sciences should provide advice on higher education in general.

3.3 The Council recognises that there may well be factors in the functioning of the HSRC and the NRF that may have contributed to the weakening of the humanities and the social sciences and, in addition, may have precluded the two bodies from giving full effect to the research co-ordination and collaboration functions that are an integral part of their respective mandates. In this regard, the Council notes:

- (i) The interpretation offered in the ASSAf study that the weakening of the humanities and social sciences is in large part due to the overarching “techno-economic” policy discourse of the National System of Innovation and the “steady decline in funding from the NRF together with the absence of clear signals that its funding policy was underpinned by a coherent and strategic set of balances between supporting the Humanities and supporting other science domains” (ASSAf: 55).
- (ii) The argument advanced in the Final Report that the role of the HSRC, which is supposed to be the “lynchpin for the provision of the research and knowledge needed by the state” and presumably its mandate more generally, has been undermined by insufficient budgetary allocations, thus forcing it to “compete with the private sector and international consortia to make up” its budgetary shortfalls (Final Report: 51).

3.3.1 The Council is concerned, however, that there is no attempt in the Final Report at analysing these factors in any detail and assessing whether they could be satisfactorily addressed through strengthening the HSRC and NRF. In the Council’s view such an analysis may have pointed to

what the Council considers may be a systemic challenge in contributing to the weakening of the humanities and social sciences, that is, the lack of or weak co-ordination in the policy development process between the Department of Higher Education and Training, which is responsible for the university system, and the Department of Science and Technology, which is responsible for the development of the science system, including research funding and support that is disbursed through and co-ordinated by the NRF and the Science Councils, including the HSRC. This lack of co-ordination and the differing interpretations of the role of the humanities and social sciences in higher education and science and technology policies are suggested as one of the factors contributing to the weakening of the humanities in the ASSAf study. Indeed the need for strengthening co-ordination and collaboration between the DHET and DST, including the HSRC and the NRF, in the identification and determination of national research priorities and funding is recognised in *Education White Paper 3: A Programme for the Transformation of Higher Education*, the *National Plan for Higher Education* and the Green Paper on Post-School Education and Training.

- 3.3.2 Greater co-ordination between the DHET and the DST would be a first step in ensuring that the role of the humanities and social sciences in contributing to social, cultural, political and economic development is recognised and that the necessary interventions, as outlined in the Final Report and the ASSAf study, are developed to strengthen the humanities and social sciences. The practical outcome of strengthened co-ordination could include the establishment of Centres of Excellence at higher education institutions, the provision of additional chairs in the humanities and social sciences as part of the South African Research Chairs Initiative, and funding for the catalytic research projects envisaged. If these outcomes are to be achieved, there may also be a need to review the role and funding of the HSRC, as well as rethinking the structure of the NRF as the Final Report suggests, or the establishment of a sub-structure within the NRF to support the humanities and social sciences. Either way it would obviate in the Council's view the need to establish a separate structure to promote and strengthen the humanities and social sciences.
- 3.3.3 The Council would also like to highlight that both the HSRC and the NRF have the necessary experience, systems, policies and procedures, including scholarship and grant-making systems and peer-review processes to evaluate research proposals, all of which would have to be developed anew by the NIHSS. The latter will be resource-intensive with all of the attendant implications given the scarcity of skills and funding.

4. Conclusion

4.1 In the light of the preceding analysis, the establishment of the proposed NIHSS is in the Council's view premature, in particular, given the fact that there is:

- no policy clarity on the rationale for the establishment of the proposed NIHSS;
- potential duplication and overlap between the functions of the NIHSS and the HSRC, NRF, ASSAf and the Council on Higher Education; and
- a blurring of lines between some of the functions of the proposed NIHSS and the core function and responsibilities of universities in terms of teaching and learning.

4.2 The Council believes that there is need for further engagement to strengthen co-ordination in the development of policy between the DHET and DST and, as a first step, the two departments should jointly investigate the role that the HSRC, the NRF and ASSAf could play in strengthening the humanities and social sciences.

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