

**EVALUATING RESEARCH PERFORMANCE: A POSITION PAPER
ON THE STATE OF SOCIOLOGY PREPARED FOR THE NRF**

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PART ONE

BACKGROUND TO THE POSITION PAPER

In August 1997 the Executive Director of the Centre for Scientific Development (CSD), Professor Marla Singh, initiated a research project on *Transforming the Disciplines* (Appendix 1). The aim of the project was to explore the future of the social sciences in South Africa. This was to be done by locating the South African social sciences within global developments in the disciplines and connecting these debates to discussions on curriculum transformation that were taking place in South Africa at that time (Mamdani, et al, *Social Dynamics*, 1998). Six disciplines were identified and the following coordinators were appointed; History - Colin Bundy, Political Science – John Daniel, Economics - Harry Zaranda, Education - Saleem Bhadat, African Studies – Mahmood Mamdani and Sociology – Eddie Webster.

The project had been stimulated by a report to the CSD by Immanuel Wallerstein – at the time president of the International Sociological Association (ISA) – after visiting South Africa as a guest of the CSD to attend the annual South African Sociological Association (SASA) conference in July 1996. In his report he suggested that South African sociology under apartheid had become rather parochial.

“South African sociologists had been intellectually isolated and thus seem to an outsider a bit provincial”. He did however, go on to say “that provinciality is basically the case everywhere, including Europe and North America. But it remains a question of degree.”(Appendix 2).

The first meeting of the group was held in November 1997 at the CSD Offices in Pretoria where it was decided that the Education Policy Unit at the University of the Western Cape who would also implement the study would draw up a questionnaire and interview schedule. Largely for cost purposes the study was restricted to seven campuses; the University of the Western Cape, University of Cape Town, University of Stellenbosch, University of the Witwatersrand, Rand Afrikaans University, University of South Africa and University of the North.

The research process was divided into two parts; interviews with the heads of sociology departments at the seven institutions and a questionnaires to all academic staff at the sociology departments at all seven institutions. The interviews were conducted in 1998 and the data was processed in early 1999. The response was extremely poor across all institutions and the data was thin.

It was also decided at the November 1997 workshop that each co-ordinator would appoint a representative team to assist in drawing up the report. In the case of sociology, a team of four drawn from four universities was appointed:

- University of the Transkei, Nhlanhla Jordan;
- Rhodes University, Professor Frederick Hendricks;
- University of Natal-Durban, Professor Charles Crothers (who replaced Professor Ari Sitas when he went on sabbatical)
- University of the Witwatersrand, Professor Edward Webster assisted by a research intern, Shireen Ally.

At the first workshop of the research team in February 1998, the project was divided up into three parts:

- how **has** social knowledge been produced in South Africa,
- how **is** social knowledge being produced in South Africa and internationally and
- how **should** social knowledge be produced in South Africa?

A final workshop was convened in June 1999 and a draft report drawn up. Because of the extremely poor response rate to the EPU survey, a shortened questionnaire was distributed via electronic mail to all staff members of sociology departments at sixteen universities. In addition, a comparative case study was done of the University of the Western Cape and Rhodes University. Information on universities overseas was obtained through the Internet.

The report – forty-nine pages long and titled *Sociology; the State of the Discipline* - was presented to the National Research Foundation (NRF) in December 1999. The total cost of the project to the NRF was less than R12,000, essentially the accommodation and travel costs of the three out-of-town members of the research team to attend two workshops at the University of the Witwatersrand.

The starting point of the report was the argument that apartheid had shaped the production of social knowledge in South Africa and had produced “many sociologies”. These divisions, from institutional resources to the focus of teaching and research work, were created in the past and persist in the present.

The report identified several trends within the discipline, which, the report argued, could be seen either as threats or opportunities.

The first trend is an increasing theoretical diversity within the discipline, which has opened up spaces for new intellectual approaches and an opportunity for creative pluralism. However, such diversity could lead to a debilitating fragmentation and an incoherent Sociology where sociologists are not engaged in dialogue with one another.

Secondly, the report suggested that the impetus that drove Sociology in the 1980’s, namely, its intimate dialogue with social movements, had been lost in the nineties. Sociologists seemed to be responding to social issues, rather than shaping them in new directions.

In a context where there had been large-scale transition, and the demand for applied knowledge and research had increased, sociologists were increasingly divided on the role and value of such social knowledge. Some saw it as an opportunity to become involved in social reconstruction, while others viewed it as a threat to the autonomy of the academic.

The fourth trend is the impact of globalisation. Globalisation affords sociologists opportunities to become involved in a “new world” – exposed to and shaping new ideas, and participating in international conferences. However, globalisation could simultaneously undermine a local Sociology.

Finally, the need to locate the discipline within a changing institutional context was paramount, the report argued, because such institutions have placed increasing demands and pressures on the discipline, all of which will shape the future of the discipline. The social

sciences and the natural sciences are now funded by one body, the NRF, SAQA is attempting to bridge the gap between the 'world of work' and knowledge production, the Department of Education is aiming for equity in the higher education system, and restructuring at universities has placed pressure on Sociology to become more commercialised and market-oriented.

The five trends above were, overall, creating a demand for a more 'relevant' Sociology. The question facing the discipline is whether such relevance is to be dictated by the employment market, by a desire to meet basic social needs or by some combination of both.

The report concluded by arguing that many of these trends place conflicting demands on the discipline. Such tension is not unmanageable, but sociologists need to find a way of balancing these conflicting pressures that ensures the coherence of their intellectual project.

The report concluded with eight recommendations.

- The need to revitalise the professional association, the South African Sociological Association (SASA)
- The need to establish the current journal, *Society in Transition (SiT)*, as a premier journal of sociology in South Africa
- The introduction of sociology into feeder schools
- The commissioning of a comprehensive history of the discipline in South Africa
- The encouragement of a commission for the state of the discipline for the continent as a whole
- The establishment of continent-wide networks in specific research areas
- The promotion of excellence in theory and methods
- The strengthening of the discipline through creating strong regional networks within South Africa

On the basis of this report the NRF commissioned Professor E Webster in February 2000 to disseminate the report and assess its impact within the sociological community. In addition, Webster was asked to produce a position paper 'on possible framing questions and research approaches/methodologies that state of the discipline studies are guided by'. He was requested, in the paper, to examine international and national practices. Professor Webster was given an innovation grant of R40,000.00 to take on both tasks (Appendix 3).

It should be noted here that events had in some senses overtaken the initiative begun in 1997. The title of the original project was the ‘transformation of the social sciences’, reflecting the spirit of the times, both the opportunities opening up for a radically different social science and the possible constraints that could result from the restructuring of the higher education system. In the course of the following two years, the project changed its title to the ‘state of the social sciences’, suggesting something more neutral. Indeed, when the report was presented to the NRF at the end of 1999, the initiator, Professor Mala Singh, had already been seconded to the Department of Education for three years, and the CSD had been absorbed into the NRF.

The issue that now preoccupied the NRF was that of research evaluation. More specifically, would the social sciences follow the system of individual rating of the research performance of scientists, established by the Foundation for Research and Development (FRD)? The CSD had developed a different system of evaluation over the years and many in the humanities and social sciences were concerned that the NRF would impose on them the FRD system, a system that many felt was inappropriate to their disciplines.

Three additional developments were preoccupying academics. The Department of Education released a report, the Size and Shape Task Group of the Commission for Higher Education, in which a three-tiered differentiated university system was proposed. Many sociologists are drawn from the historically disadvantaged universities and were anxious over their future. At the same time the NRF announced a new funding system based on ‘focus areas’ covering both the natural and social sciences. Applications for multi-disciplinary research was actively encouraged.

Finally, universities were beginning to experience an intensification of the market and the emergence of corporate management styles with knowledge increasingly being presented as a commodity. In the words of Eve Bertelsen,

“A thorough-going commoditisation of knowledge and instruction is well underway, and in the process universities are being systematically transformed into a client-service industry for the late capitalist market system. (Bertelsen, 1998; 130)

PART TWO

DISSEMINATION OF THE REPORT AND FEEDBACK FROM THE WORKSHOPS

Four regional workshops were held. In addition, the report was presented at the first plenary session of the annual conference of SASA. A total of two hundred and eighty people attended these five presentations. The following regions were identified.

- The northern region, this covered the University of Potchefstroom, University of Vista-Soweto, University of the Witwatersrand, Rand Afrikaans University, University of the North, University of the North West, University of Pretoria, University of the South Africa and University of Venda. For this region the workshop was held at the NRF in Pretoria on 5th May 2000. Twenty-five people attended.
- The central region, this covered the University of the Free State, University of Natal-Durban, University of Natal-Pietermaritzburg, University of Zululand, and University of

Durban-Westville. The workshop was held on 12th May 2000 at the Innovation Centre at the University of Natal-Durban. Fifty people attended.

- The eastern region, this covered, the University of Fort Hare, the University of Transkei, University of Port Elizabeth, Rhodes University and University of Vista – Port Elizabeth. The workshop was held on 12th May 2000 at the Regent Hotel in East London. Twenty people attended.
- The southern region, this covered the University of Stellenbosch, University of the Western Cape and University of Cape Town. This workshop was held on 5th June 2000 at the University of the Western Cape. Thirty-five people attended.

A final report-back was given at the annual conference of SASA on Monday, 3rd July 2000 at the University of the Western Cape. Approximately one hundred and fifty people attended this session.

Feedback from the five workshops

“Sociologists are congenitally self-critical, reluctant to take for granted the convenient research conventions that permit disciplines with firmly established paradigms to speed efficiently, if myopically, down science’s main highways” (DiMaggio, 1997:186).

This tendency to be self-critical is true of this report; a report that reflects accurately the views of those interviewed. But it is also a sign of the inherent confidence of the discipline in itself that it is able to reflect critically on its intellectual activities. Certainly by doing so, and being the only discipline from the original project that has produced, published and disseminated its report, we feel strengthened by this process and the new sense of direction it has given the discipline.

In general, participants in the workshops responded positively to the report, seeing it as an important ‘first step’ by sociologists to reflect on, analyse, and plan the future of their discipline. Disappointment was expressed with the sample size of the survey conducted by the EPU. The need for all the voices that have, and are, shaping sociology to be heard, was also emphasised. It was also suggested that the role of Industrial Sociology, which had become the main focus in terms of student numbers on many campuses, did not feature in the report.

On balance participants shared the same sense, as the authors of the report did, of a mixture of ‘opportunity and threat’ for the discipline in the new millennium. It was agreed that severe challenges confronted South African sociology, but that it would be wrong to give the impression that there was a generalised crisis.

Indeed, some believed that they were stronger now than before, with more staff and students than before. Their demographic composition, both in terms of race and ethnicity, had been transformed over the past five years. The old undergraduate and honours syllabi had been thoroughly revised, taught Masters degrees had been introduced, and new multi-disciplinary programmes had been introduced at all levels. That departments, in terms of cultural and political backgrounds and theoretical and methodological preference, were already achieving the notion of ‘creative pluralism’ mentioned in the report!

Reflecting on the feedback to the report it seems that a new generation of ‘post-apartheid sociologists’ are emerging who are responding to the challenges of a democratic South Africa in the era of globalisation in creative ways. They are alive to the possibility of multi-disciplinary work in which sociology brings to the social sciences a distinct subject matter, a distinct set of methods, a distinct set of concepts and a body of theory and literature. They are encouraged by the support given by the current Minister of Education, Kader Asmal, for a broad defence of the social sciences. In particular, they support his defence of critical thinking skills as crucial to the consolidation and deepening of our new democracy.

They see in South Africa’s social crisis – its inequality, its crime, and its xenophobia – an opportunity to engage in important sociological research. They believe that they are in a strong position, not only to make a contribution to debates on social policy within South Africa, but also to add to the development of sociological theory internationally.

Participants in the workshops agreed that in some departments student numbers are declining, that the discipline could be undermined by the notion of ‘programmes’, that sociology is not producing enough PhD’s, and that departments are often driven by sub-disciplines, rather than by core theory. There is evidence, in other words, that the discipline could be fragmenting and losing its intellectual coherence.

But the overall impression from the workshops is one of a discipline that is beginning to reposition itself in the new South Africa. Significantly, the 1996 SASA conference had as its theme ‘Southern Africa in a Global Context’ with, appropriately, the ISA President Immanuel Wallerstein as the keynote speaker. The theme for the 1997 conference was ‘Beyond Afro-Pessimism; Development and Identity in a Globalising World’. In recognition of the strides made in repositioning South African sociology, SASA has won the bid for hosting the prestigious World Congress of Sociology in 2006 in Durban.

Strong support was given in the workshops to the recommendations arising out of the report:

- There was widespread agreement that SASA needed to be revitalised. The need for a strong sociology association that would engage the state and provide a critical and professional voice for sociology was emphasised. Workshop participants made a number of suggestions as to how SASA could be strengthened; all sociology lecturers and postgraduate students should become members of SASA; a plenary session should be devoted at the forthcoming SASA conference to the future of sociology; that senior members of the discipline become more active in the activities of the association; that regional networks be established; that workshops be held on building capacity for publication; that an e-mail distribution list be created to share information; that SASA convenes regular meetings of sociology heads of department to share information; that a grant be obtained from an institution, such as the Ford Foundation, to support younger researchers to do research and postgraduate studies.
- There was strong support for developing the current SASA journal, *Society in Transition (SiT)*, as a premier journal of sociology. It was pointed out that the election of a new editor of *SiT* should be seen as an opportunity to add new vigour by;
 - a) Raising standards, in terms of both intellectual merit and sub-editing,
 - b) Establishing a new editorial board elected on the basis of competence and representivity (particularly regional representivity),

- c) Developing new editorial practices that make use of e-mail to involve a wider number of people in policy, commissioning, refereeing and reviewing.
- There was support at one workshop for the recommendation to introduce sociology into high schools. It was argued that this would create jobs for our graduates and also introduce sociology to students as a school subject.
 - There was support for the commissioning of a comprehensive history of the discipline in South Africa. One of the workshops emphasised the importance of producing departmental histories and a number of participants volunteered to produce such histories. The need to include the exile tradition in such a history was also mentioned.
 - There was support for a commission on the state of the discipline in Africa as a whole. It was proposed that the NRF be approached to commission this. It was felt that this would create a wider continental network and that there was a strong need to connect sub-Saharan countries, especially in areas such as development studies, rural sociology; and health and wellbeing. It was pointed out that SASA had begun to establish such links with its colleagues in the SADC region. Indeed, a collection of research essays on Southern African sociology had been produced by Theresa da Silva and Ari Sitas on behalf of SASA and the ISA in 1998 titled, *'Gathering Voices; Perspectives on the Social Sciences in Southern Africa'*.
 - There was support for the need to promote excellence in Social Theory. It was felt by some that one of the reasons for a lack of interest in the association was a downplaying of the role of theory in sociology.
 - It was agreed that the current attempts at establishing greater regional co-operation between departments of sociology should be strengthened and that the NRF should direct resources to these endeavours. This objective could best be achieved through each region getting together to develop a regional strategy.

Workshop participants did not favour differentiating the South African university system into fixed categories. It was felt that this would relegate certain universities, such as Historically Black Universities (HBU's), to a permanent state of subordination, penalising them for historical disadvantage and for being under-resourced. Instead participants favoured greater regional specialisation and co-operation between departments. This, it was argued, could lead to the promotion of both equity and excellence.

By grouping departments of sociology into geographically cognate areas it was felt that a more effective utilisation of resources could take place. For example, a department could specialise by developing a graduate programme on health, while another could concentrate on rural sociology. This could lead to the establishment of 'centres of excellence' in certain universities who could achieve a critical mass of staff with PhD's and graduate students in a specialised area. In some instances departments may choose to become 'centres of teaching excellence' at the undergraduate level. Regional co-operation could also lead to greater equity by opening up the possibility of, gradually over time, redistributing resources across institutions and across the historic divide between the Historically White Universities (HWU's) and the HBU's.

Evaluating and Rating of Researchers

Time had been put aside at the workshops for a discussion on how research performance could best be evaluated. Four policy options were identified.

- A. The FRD evaluation and rating system,
- B. The CSD system, i.e. the system that had existed in the past for the social sciences,
- C. A professional association model,
- D. The UK Research Assessment Exercise (RAE)

A. The FRD evaluation system

This system was introduced in 1984 on the advice of Professor Jack De Wet, a retired Dean of Science at the University of Cape Town, on the grounds that

“...the most important criteria researchers would have to comply with to access FRD funding would be the quality of their research and their research students. The FRD would invest its money in people with a track record of doing good research. This led to a novel concept of peer evaluation and the rating of individual researchers in higher education, based on their recent track records and outputs in research.”
(The Evaluation and Rating of the Research Performance of Scientists in South Africa, NRF, March 2000)

The process of evaluating and rating individual scientists in South Africa involves four steps:

- Inviting applications from researchers who wish to be evaluated;
- Appointing the most suitable peer reviewers;
- Conducting a series of committee meetings to reach decisions about the research performance of individuals;
- Ensuring that there are effective procedures to deal with appeals.

The outcome of this process was the rating of applicants into six categories:

- A – researchers who, without doubt, are accepted by their peers as being world leaders for the high quality and impact of their recent research output.
- B – researchers who enjoy considerable international recognition as independent researchers for the high quality and impact of their recent research output.
- C – established researchers who, as individuals or members of a team, produce research outputs of an international standard which are appreciated by the science, engineering or technology community either internationally or locally.
- P - young researchers (normally younger than 35 years of age) who obtained their doctorate (or equivalent) not more than five years ago and who, on the basis of their exceptional potential as researchers during their doctoral studies and post-doctoral

career as indicated by their research outputs, are recognised internationally as having the potential to become future leaders in their field.

- Y - young researchers (normally younger than 35 years of age) who obtained their doctorate (or equivalent) not more than five years ago and who, on the basis of their exceptional potential as researchers during their doctoral studies and post-doctoral career as indicated by their research outputs are recognised as showing promise of establishing themselves as researchers within a five-year period after evaluation.
- L - Members of the science, engineering and technology community (normally younger than 55 years) who have demonstrated potential or ability as researchers in the past, and who can show promise of being able to establish or re-establish themselves as researchers within a five-year period after the submission of evaluation documents. Applicants must demonstrate that they could not realise their research ability by virtue of a lack of a research environment, or time spent in industry, or on maternity leave, or raising a family.

Twelve fields of research was identified by the FRD:

- Animal and veterinary Sciences
- Biochemistry
- Chemistry
- Earth Science
- Engineering
- Health Sciences
- Forestry and Agricultural Sciences
- Mathematical Science
- Microbiology and Plant Pathology
- Physics
- Plant Sciences
- Science, Engineering and Technology Education

In the discussion at the workshop on the 5th May 2000 at the NRF offices in Pretoria, Dr G Von Greunewaldt, vice president of the NRF, argued that the FRD system was a tough system, but it contributed to overall quality and provides the basic push for researchers to reach their full potential. He said the system was currently under review and that, over the years, a number of problems had been identified with the system. Some of these problems had been met by modifications to the system.

- The first problem is the tendency for those in the C-category to be marginalised.
- A second problem is the tendency for the system to marginalise researchers from the HBU's. To some extent, this problem has been overcome by creating an additional category, category L, for researchers who are able to demonstrate that they have not been able to reach their potential because of 'the lack of a research environment'.
- A third problem is the tendency to neglect the applied sciences such as engineering. Here again the introduction of category L helps overcome this problem.

- It penalises those disciplines, such as plant sciences, that tend to publish locally.

In the workshops participants were critical of the idea of extending the FRD system to the social sciences. Six problems were raised:

1. It was argued that in sociology, to a greater degree than in the natural sciences, there are a variety of approaches and orientations to the discipline. While there is a core subject matter to the discipline, there is no consensus on how to approach this subject matter. The conceptual and methodological diversity that sociology provides, it was argued, is as vital to the social scientific enterprise as cultural diversity is to society and as biological diversity is to the ecosystem. But this diversity will make it difficult to get agreement on the ranking of individuals in a simple hierarchy, even if one could obtain agreement on what these criteria for ranking should be.
2. A second, and linked point, is that for sociologists their subject matter is inextricably bound up with the kinds of problems the solution of which concerns every human being in one way or another; over which vast disagreements exist; for which many have died—such problems as war and peace, the relations between black and white, socialism, poverty, unemployment, and so on. To investigate them involves sociologists in great historical arguments, and makes it very difficult for them to divorce their own views as citizens from their work as sociologists.

Of course the problem of social values applies to all the social sciences, and should not be seen as a comment on sociology alone. It is also not the case that judgements on scholarly work cannot be made. The point is that there is no basic agreement among sociologists in different societies with different social structures on these issues. This will make ranking of sociologists more difficult.

3. A related, but additional point raised in the workshops is that the social sciences and the humanities are quite grounded in a particular geographical and historical context. Indeed, this is why Area Studies has emerged where the intellectual focus is on a specific region, such as Asian studies or African studies, rather than the discipline. This could create confusion when it comes to ranking; are the researchers ranked by their ‘Africanist’ peers, or by their disciplinary peers? While of course these problems exist whether you rank or not, it becomes an issue only if you attempt to introduce one inclusive system of ranking for the sciences.
4. Sociology is a ‘generalist discipline’. Consequently, relatively few fields within the discipline have a critical mass of scholars who share both a subject matter and a method of investigation. It will be difficult to find sufficient numbers of scholars who are familiar both with the substantive focus and the method of investigation of a researcher. This will render the review process vulnerable to errors of judgement and will make it difficult to build consensus among practitioners.
5. The focus of the FRD rating is on the individual. Participants felt that it would be fairer to evaluate an entity – a teaching entity such as a department or a research entity such as a unit or an institute. Research is increasingly a ‘team activity’ and the ability of a team of researchers to produce research excellence should be evaluated.

6. Finally, it was felt that the FRD model did not adequately recognise the need to develop the capacity of researchers - through internships, for example - as a central component of any research evaluation.

B. The CSD system

The CSD system shares with the FRD system the concept of peer review by researchers of repute in their respective disciplines. However it differs quite fundamentally from the FRD system in that no attempt is made to rank individual researchers - and then fund them generously on the basis of their track record. Instead, the focus in the CSD system is on the quality of the research proposal, its impact and its capacity to build potential. (NRF, 1999: 4-5) The evaluation form focuses on the way the proposal deals with the different aspects of the problem formulation, significance, approach, feasibility and budget. It also takes into account the impact that the proposed research will have both within and outside the academic community, and the potential the project has to develop research capacity and create training opportunities for junior staff and students.

“The new evaluation has two main objectives. On the one hand, to focus referees’ attention on those issues considered particularly important to evaluate a proposal and on the other to guide candidates in the organisation of their research proposal. The evaluation form is also developmental in intent in order to provide feedback to unsuccessful applicants. The whole evaluation process ... has been done taking into account a broader understanding of quality. The quality of research proposals is evaluated against the state of the discipline both nationally and internationally.” (Prem Naidoo, Director: Research and Scholarship, NRF: 1999: 5)

The most prestigious grant category are the research units - twelve throughout the country in 1999 (NRF, 1999:9) These units consist of researchers and postgraduate scholars engaged in ongoing specialised research programmes under the guidance of a director who is a proven authority in their field at national and international levels. Prem Naidoo described the importance of these units as two-fold. “Not only are they highly productive in terms of actual research output but they are also invaluable in terms of training younger researchers through internships.”(NRF, 1999:9)

In addition, there were directed research grants, where the CSD imposed a condition on either the topic of research – such as Social Transformation in South Africa – or in terms of who does the research – such as Women-in –Research; dissemination grants, where funds were provided for the dissemination of research results: exchange grants, where funds were provided for local and international exchange; or support grants to support innovation in the social sciences. (NRF, 1999: 8).

In the discussion in the workshops it was pointed out that a new system of evaluation had been introduced recently and that it was difficult to assess its effectiveness. However it had been reported in the annual report of the CSD that the success rate of applications was lower, a result possibly of using ‘a more rigorous instrument to evaluate applications’. (NRF, 1999: 8).

Two further points were made in discussions:

- That the track record of the applicant needs to be given as much weight as the quality and impact of the research proposal

- That the research units were highly productive, both in terms of publication outputs and in terms of training new researchers through the internship system.

C. A Professional Association Model

This proposal was not fully developed in the workshops, but the essence of the idea is that the professional association (in the case of sociology this would be SASA) would take on a greater role in evaluating the discipline.

A number of issues were raised with regard to this proposal:

- firstly, it was pointed out that the association was not representative of all sociologists in the country, especially at the senior level,
- secondly, SASA does not have the capacity to engage in an on-going monitoring activity,
- thirdly, it was unclear as to how such an approach would work. It was mentioned that in the United States, the American Sociological Association (ASA) is involved in the ranking of departments based on individual member's assessments – a system, it was observed, that inevitably favours the larger departments with the largest number of sociologists voting!

In spite of these obvious limitations, participants felt that SASA ought to be involved in the evaluation process on a more formal basis and that this would in fact provide a further motivation for revitalising the association.

D. The UK Research Assessment Exercise (RAE)

The primary purpose of RAE is to produce ratings of research quality which is used by the higher education funding bodies in determining the main grant for research to the institutions they fund. The RAE is funded and managed by the departments of Higher Education in the United Kingdom. (Research Assessment Exercise, 2001, Department of Higher and Further Education, Training and Employment, London)

The assessment process is based on peer review and is not mechanistic. Assessment panels are drawn from twelve senior scholars in their respective disciplines. The panels are expected to exercise their professional judgement on the overall quality of the research activity described in each submission. Each department submits four articles by each person. Departments are rated on the basis of the following criteria:

- The quality of the publications, their degree of innovation, their significance, and the degree to which they set the intellectual or policy agenda at the local and international level, the degree to which new audiences have been generated by the research work in the unit in assessment, and to what degree an on-going relationships with user communities have been successfully established.
- The degree of international excellence, judged by the degree to which research outputs have been translated or appeared abroad, the significance of invitations to give plenary

sessions abroad, or participate in leading edge research networks, editorial boards of high quality international journals in the field, and so on.

- The vitality of the research culture of the entity. This includes the quality of postgraduate research activity and the extent, to which the research activities of new and existing staff are being developed,
- The range and scale of external funding. Special consideration will be given to competitive funding.

Rating is out of five, allocated as follows:

- 5 Star - Quality that equates to attainable levels of international excellence in more than half of the research activity submitted and attainable levels of national excellence in the remainder
- 5 - Quality that equates to attainable levels of international excellence in up to half of the research activity submitted and to attainable levels of national excellence in virtually all of the remainder
- 4 - Quality that equates to attainable levels of national excellence in virtually all of the research activity submitted, showing some evidence of international excellence
- 3a - Quality that equates to attainable levels of national excellence in over two-thirds of the research activity submitted, possibly showing evidence of international excellence
- 3b - Quality that equates to attainable levels of national excellence in more than half of the research activity submitted
- 2 - Quality that equates to attainable levels of national excellence in up to half of the research activity submitted
- 1 - Quality that equates to attainable levels of national excellence in none, or virtually none, of the research activity submitted.

The Sociology Unit of Assessment covers quantitative and qualitative, empirical and theoretical study of the social structures, cultures and everyday practices of advanced and developing societies, including styles and material standards of living, opinions, values and institutions. Includes social theory and social research methodology. It overlaps with all the social sciences.

In its guidelines the Sociology unit of assessment raises a number of key issues of principle governing the Panels work.

- The Sociology panel is aware of the heterogeneous nature of sociology at the level both of the discipline and of its specialisms. The panel commits itself to taking appropriate

account of this diversity and its effect upon research practice when reviewing submissions and reaching decisions.

- Each submission will be read in its entirety by all members of the Panel and subsequently re-read as appropriate. No assessment for a submission will depend on the views of a single panellist. All ratings will be awarded through consensus or a clear majority.
- Because of the high degree of interdisciplinary work undertaken in sociology, it may be necessary to seek advice from outside advisers.

Substantial sums of money go to those entities rated at the top and funding is tied directly to the ranking. (Interview, Huw Beyon Director of the School of Social Sciences, University of Cardiff, Wales; Member of the Sociology Unit of Assessment, 2001)

In the feedback from the workshops, participants were keen to learn more about the RAE in the UK and raised a number of issues that suggested that this system might be worth exploring in more detail.

Positive Feedback

- The idea of evaluating an entity rather than an individual was seen as more appropriate than the FRD system
- The system led to the creation of a critical mass of researchers in a particular field and therefore raises the quality of South African sociology

Negative Feedback

- It was felt that the system was highly bureaucratic and possibly too expensive and time-consuming for the relatively small community of scholars in South Africa
- that would have a negative impact on teaching and on capacity building as the system only rewards quality academic publications
- It would magnify the differences between the HBU's and the HWU's as the stronger and wealthier universities would 'buy -out' talent from the weaker institutions.

Reflecting on the feedback from the workshops, it became clear that none of the four approaches on their own met the approval of the participants. However our own experience of evaluation as an NRF research unit had been extremely useful, both in giving us feedback and in strategic planning,

In part three we analyse the evaluation undertaken by the NRF of the Sociology of Work Unit at the University of the Witwatersrand.

PART THREE

The Evaluation of SWOP - An Institutional Case Study of Benchmarking Research in South Africa

Organisational Structure of Research at Wits

The Sociology of Work Unit (SWOP) was recognised as a university research unit in 1990, having previously been a university programme. At the University of the Witwatersrand the research interests of individuals usually drive research entities. Eighty-one research entities have arisen in an ad hoc manner. Table 1.1 identifies the different research entities, who they are accountable to and the nature of support given by the University Research Committee at the University.

Table 3.1 Research Entities at Wits

Research Entities	Duration (Years)	Number	Accountability	Support
Individual	1		Screening Committee URC	R25 000 p.a.
Programme	3	33	Three-yearly Review Advisory and Review Panel URC	Block Grant
Group	3	16	Three-yearly Review Advisory and Review Panel URC	Block Grant
Unit	5	22	Quinquennial Review Advisory and Review Panel URC	Large Block Grant
Institute	Indefinite	8	Quinquennial Review	Large Block Grant

As described in table 1.2 there are two categories of staff involvement in SWOP: those on the SWOP payroll (SWOP staff), and those who are associated with the research activities of SWOP (SWOP associates).

Staff associates are on the payroll of teaching departments, mainly but not only the department of sociology. Research associates are part of a network of researchers off-campus. Student associates are interns sponsored by the NRF and registered in higher degrees in the department of sociology.

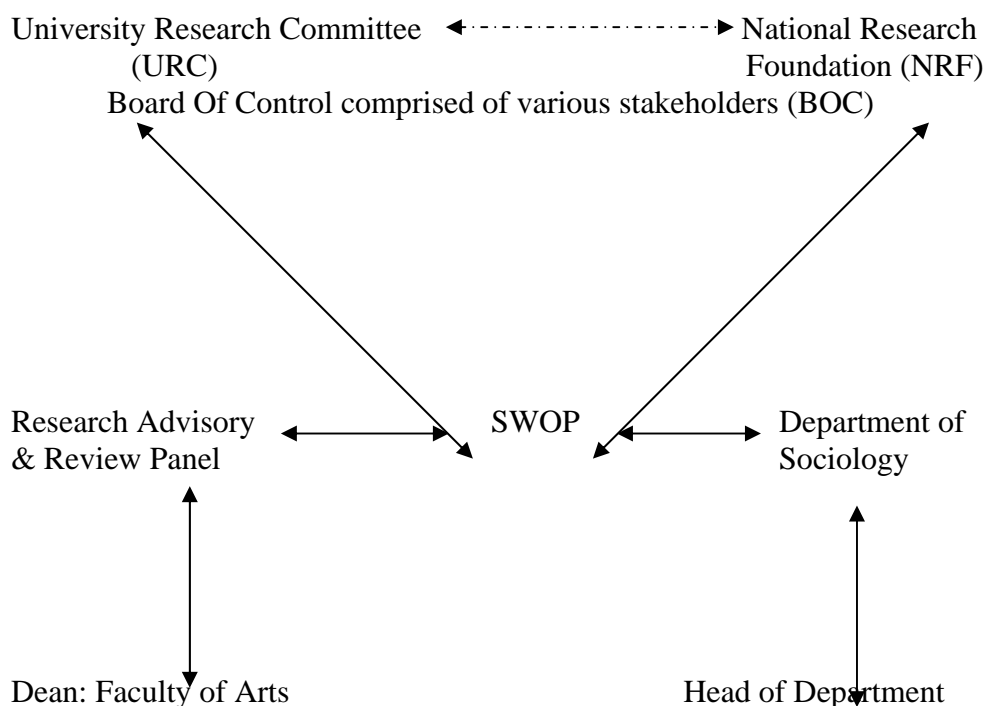
**Table 3.2
SWOP Staff**

SWOP Staff	Director (50/50)	SWOP Associates
Admin Officer		7 Staff Associates
Secretary		7 Research Associates
4 Research Officers		8 Student Associates (Interns)
		Admin

Research units are decentralised and have a large amount of autonomy. The Board of Control only meets once a year and does not interfere with the day-to-day running of the unit. The unit is reviewed every five years by the URC and every four by the NRF. However, the reporting channels are unclear as to whether SWOP is accountable to the Faculty Research Advisory Review Panel or to the Board of Control (BOC). See table 3.3.

Table 3.3

Structure of Accountability of Research at Wits



The situation is currently in a state of flux as a debate is taking place around whether research units should be accountable to the faculty or to the University Research Committee. In addition the department of Sociology is being absorbed into the School of Social Sciences. This has led to a debate around whether SWOP should report to the head of the school or to the dean of faculty.

Data-gathering on Research Output

Since the mid-80's the university research office has produced an annual review of all research activities undertaken in the University. This information is also made available through SAPSE.

In addition, all research units are required to produce an Annual Report, which is tabled at the annual meeting of the Board of Control. We have reported annually to the University since 1990, the year we became a university-recognised unit.

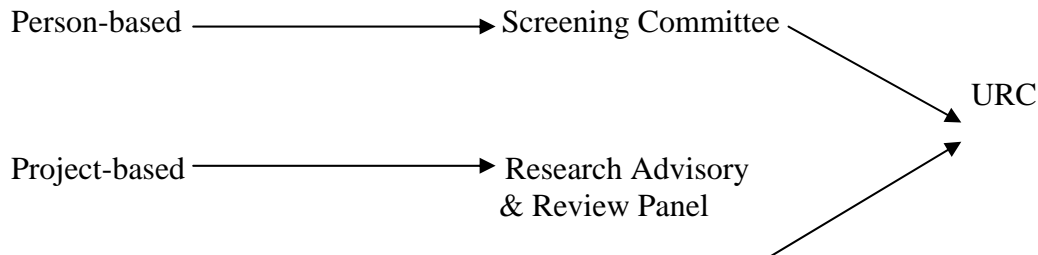
In 1996 we became an NRF recognised research unit. We now produce one research report for both bodies covering the progress we have made on our projects; the number of higher

degrees completed the publications produced and our proposed programme for the following year.

Evaluation Procedures

Members of the University can apply on an individual basis or project basis for research funds (as illustrated in the diagram below).

Research Funding Applications/ Proposals



As an NRF recognised unit, SWOP is required to be evaluated externally at the end of each four-year cycle. This took place at the end of 1999 and was conducted by Professor Steven Frenkel, professor of Human Resource Management at the Australian School of Management, University of New South Wales. The evaluator was chosen by the NRF after nominations by the Board of Control.

These are the guidelines for the evaluation of an NRF research unit:

1. The quality of the research
 - ❖ Relevance
 - ❖ International standard
 - ❖ Substantive and methodological development
 - ❖ Theory building
2. The quantity of the research
 - ❖ Publications and media dissemination
 - ❖ Replication of research
3. National and international networking
4. Graduate training

The evaluation concludes with recommendations with regard to:

- ❖ Continuation
- ❖ Type of research
- ❖ Methodological approach
- ❖ Management of the unit
- ❖ Dissemination of research findings

Procedure adopted by the evaluator

The evaluator gathered information from the following sources in preparing his report:

- Main research papers and reports published by the unit.
- The unit's annual reports.
- Relevant documents provided by the director pertaining to the funding and productivity of the unit over recent years.
- Relevant documents from the NRF.
- Interviews with the research and associated research staff
- Interviews with senior University staff
- Discussions with research staff doing similar research at other establishments.
- Senior managers at the NRF

The report covered the following issues:

- Research quality with a table analyzing publications by category over the period under review and the benchmarking the unit on a five-point scale, locally and internationally.
- Research productivity with a table comparing the unit's productivity with that of the faculty
- National and international networking
- Graduate training
- Recommendations.

The evaluator recommended that the unit develop a concept plan aimed at repositioning itself as a world-class research centre. The NRF allocated a sum of money to assist the unit in achieving this goal. The university also allocated money to assist the unit in achieving this goal and the university foundation is assisting the unit in developing an appropriate budget and funding strategy.

On the basis of the report the NRF decided to renew the funding of the unit for a further four-year cycle.

In view of the extensive and intensive external review by the NRF, the University decided not to conduct its own quinquennial review and recommended that the unit be supported for a further five-year cycle.

The evaluation of the unit was similar to the RAE in the UK;

- It involved external peer evaluation
- The criteria involved in the evaluation was similar;

However, there were three crucial differences

- The unit was not ranked in relation to other research units as there is no public national league table;
- Although a positive evaluation led to the renewal of funding, the points awarded on the scale did not have implications for the precise amount of funding the unit received.
- A single individual did the evaluation.

Essentially, the evaluation was a systematic feedback mechanism that measured the unit's outputs against its mission and goals. It was, in other words, an effective way of guiding the unit and helping it achieve its long-term goals.

PART FOUR

CONCLUSION

Reflecting on the social sciences in South Africa, it is clear that they were badly damaged by apartheid. It is not simply the fact that a social science professor, Hendrik Verwoerd, developed the concept of apartheid; it is also that during the apartheid period sociology was, through the academic boycott, limited in its direct access to cutting-edge research in the discipline. Importantly, such isolation did not affect the natural sciences in the same way. Indeed, through the FRD system of rating of research performance, the natural scientists seem to have bypassed the boycott in large part.

Recognising the challenge facing scientists in South Africa, the FRD boldly embarked on a programme to raise the quality of scientific research. There can be no doubt that it succeeded in raising the research quality of the natural scientists. By focusing on the track record of the individual, evaluated by international peers, the FRD was able to handsomely promote high quality research.

The report, *Sociology: State of the Discipline*, and the feedback we received from the dissemination workshops, suggests that a bold strategy is required to revitalise the social sciences in South Africa.

In the process of restructuring Higher Education, we must not lose sight of our public mission; to preserve, deepen and expand the foundations of knowledge. These foundations exist in the many disciplines that have evolved over time in our universities. The university is the only institution in society that has as its public mission the preservation of these disciplines.

Creation of distinct disciplines within the social sciences is premised on the belief that systematic social knowledge requires skilled concentration on the multiple separate arenas of social reality. Over a period of a century and a half, the social sciences were partitioned into distinct groupings of knowledge; history was the first of the social sciences to achieve an autonomous institutional existence, then economics, psychology, sociology, political science, and anthropology. (Wallerstein, et al, 1996)

In the process of concentrating on distinct arenas of knowledge each discipline developed a distinct subject matter, a distinct set of methods, a distinct set of concepts, a body of theory and literature. In developing a distinct area of knowledge production, institutions were created, associations formed and traditions developed. There is, in other words, nothing essentialist about any discipline, they evolve over time, creating their own boundaries, their own interests. When we talk then of the discipline, we are also speaking of a shifting boundary that involves the politics of knowledge production.

What then, we may ask, are multi-disciplinarity and inter-disciplinarity studies? As Dr Chachage, a lecturer at the department of sociology at the University of Cape Town has argued:

“Each of the disciplines involved in a multi-disciplinary programme uses its own concepts and methods. It is only the general subject or question involved that remains the same...Being part of a multi-disciplinary or inter-disciplinary study presupposes that one already belongs to a discipline, thus contributing to dealing with an issue from different angles.” (Chachage, 1999)

The discipline of sociology has a long history in South Africa going back to the twenties. We have argued in this report that a new generation of sociologists, a post-apartheid generation, is emerging that is responding to the challenge of globalisation in South Africa in creative and innovative ways. This has been recognised by the international sociological community through its decision to host the World Congress of Sociology in Durban in 2006. This will be the first time that the congress has been held in Africa.

Globalisation has opened opportunities for cross-national links between sociological communities with nodes of scholars linked to each other by email. But there is a grave danger in the global age of a kind of pseudo ‘universalism’. It is only through an understanding of our different histories that we can arrive at an understanding of the many voices in our discipline. We need to remind ourselves that path-breaking cultural creativity in world history has often come, not from the centre, but from the periphery of cultural worlds.

In order to meet this challenge we face a complex dilemma; how do we produce world-class researchers and deal with the legacy of apartheid? This we believe can only be achieved by balancing the demand for excellence with that of equity. Put differently, the main issue to be addressed in South Africa would be to establish a dynamic balance between:

- The identification and promotion of potential vested mainly in previously disadvantaged groupings in society and
- The identification and promotion of confirmed excellence and international competitiveness to enable South Africa to participate in a globalised economy (DACST, 1996)

We included in Part Three of this report a case study in which training – through the internship system- is linked to research output in a way that begins to tackle this dilemma. However, unless this strategic objective is aligned to project management a process of what could be called strategic drift emerges – projects are not implemented, or are implemented inefficiently, time and resources are misallocated, and subjective factors influence decision-making. To bridge this gap between strategic intent and project implementation, training in project management needs to be introduced.

Furthermore senior university management needs to recognise that two research streams have emerged in our universities; an academic mode, based largely on the individual researcher operating in a teaching department, and the emergence of separate research entities based largely, as we showed in part three, on an unplanned ad hoc basis.

It is these research entities that have not been adequately incorporated into the restructuring taking place in our universities. Indeed, in some universities, they have been left out altogether. This is a legacy of our past; a system based on a sharp bifurcation between

universities (confined largely to the teaching function), and government funded research institutions, such as the CSIR and the HSRC (confined to research only). Unless restructuring addresses this anomaly, the research function of our universities will remain an add-on activity and training inadequately addressed in the research institutions.

The need for a systematic approach to the challenge facing Higher Education has been recognised by the state. The Council for Higher Education (CHE) has, in terms of the Higher Education Act, been charged with setting up a Quality Assurance system. 'Quality', Mala Singh argues, has to be linked to equity. There must be a strong developmental thrust in the system (Mala Singh, Benchmarking Performance Workshop, CENIS, University of Stellenbosch, 07 July 2000).

Clearly to meet this challenge a national system of research evaluation is needed. Our brief was to address sociologists, but our recommendations could apply to the social sciences more broadly.

PART FIVE **RECOMMENDATIONS**

We recommend that a new national system of evaluating the research performance of sociologists be introduced. We suggest the evaluation be based on the following broad principles:

- That the aim of the evaluation is to develop the research capacity of the members of the entity. The emphasis should be on providing the participants with feedback, enabling them to set themselves high but achievable goals,
- That the question of equity is central to the goal of excellence and that the ability of the entity to produce a new generation of researchers be a key component of the evaluation
- That teaching and research entities, rather than individuals be assessed. In order to deal with the legacy of inequality between universities, the NRF should actively facilitate the establishment of closer links between social scientists in the four regions identified in the report.
- That both the track records of individuals in the entity, and the quality of their research proposals, be the key components of the assessment
- That the assessment be undertaken by peers nominated by the South African Sociological Association (SASA) with the final decision being made by the NRF. The assessment panel needs to include at least one overseas sociologist.
- In order to deal with the heterogeneous nature of sociology, the panel must reflect the diversity of approaches and methodologies in the discipline and its specialisms. Members of the panel must commit themselves to taking appropriate account of this diversity when reviewing submissions and taking decisions. No assessment will depend on the views of a single panellist. All ratings will be rewarded through consensus or a clear majority.

- Because of the lack of a critical mass of scholars who share both a subject matter and a method of investigation, the high degree of inter-disciplinarity and the tendency for the social sciences to be grounded in a particular area, the panel should seek advice from outsiders- both within and outside the country - where necessary.
- That a system of rating be introduced based on the quality of the publications, the quality of the research proposals, international excellence, and research capacity building.
- That the rating be out of five, allocated as follows:
 - a) 5 Star - Quality that equates to attainable levels of international excellence in more than half of the research activity submitted and attainable levels of national excellence in the remainder. An effective system of research capacity building with a high output of successful black interns with at least one PhD
 - b) 5 - Quality that equates to attainable levels of international excellence in up to half of the research activity submitted and to attainable levels of national excellence in virtually all of the remainder. An effective system of research capacity building with a high output of successful black interns with at least one PhD
 - c) 4 - Quality that equates to attainable levels of national excellence in virtually all of the research activity submitted, showing some evidence of international excellence. An effective system of research capacity building with an output of successful black interns with at least one masters degrees
 - d) 3a - Quality that equates to attainable levels of national excellence in over two-thirds of the research activity submitted, possibly showing evidence of international excellence. A research capacity building programme with black interns.
 - e) 3b - Quality that equates to attainable levels of national excellence in more than half of the research activity submitted. A research capacity building programme with black interns.
 - f) 2 - Quality that equates to attainable levels of national excellence in up to half of the research activity submitted. A research capacity building programme.
 - g) 1 - Quality that equates to attainable levels of national excellence in none, or virtually none, of the research activity submitted. No research capacity building programme.
- Since the rating is based on those entities that balance excellence with equity, significant funding should be made available to those entities who achieve a high rating.

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