



## **CALL FOR PAPERS FOR COLLOQUIUM**

'Decolonising' knowledge production in the Humanities, Social Sciences and Arts (HSSA): Reflecting on a decade of the Charter for Humanities and Social Sciences in South African Higher Education

**27–29 AUGUST 2024**

**HOSTS:** CENTRE FOR GENDER AND AFRICA STUDIES  
FACULTY OF THE HUMANITIES, UNIVERSITY OF THE FREE STATE

**VENUE:** MODLEC HALL, A5 AND A6, UNIVERSITY OF THE FREE STATE,  
BLOEMFONTEIN CAMPUS, CENTENARY COMPLEX

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## CONFERENCE THEME

Since the Fallist Movements in 2015, the rhetoric of decolonisation entered the public imagination and very much revolved around social justice issues of access and knowledge production subsumed under the catch-all verb ‘decolonising’. Much of the subsequent discourses at universities in South Africa, and even abroad, grappled with what decolonisation might mean and what it should look like. Of course, discourses on the decolonisation of universities and knowledge production have been part of the academy since the wave of independence that turned former colonies into newly minted independent states and created bodies of thought such as area studies, postcolonialism, indigenous knowledge systems, alter-globalisation and of course decoloniality to name a few. These bodies of thought try to answer the same questions, namely why do the inequalities of the past still persist in the present and how can those inequalities be overcome? So, while the same issues are tackled, the vocabulary to make sense of them and offer solutions may vary. Modern globalised science has led to immense progress in the world, but this progress did not benefit everyone equally and sometimes coincided with exploitation of the natural environment and marginalised people. There is no denying that the current global system is internally imbalanced in terms of the distribution of resources and opportunities between richer and poorer countries and between the rich and the poor in those countries.<sup>1</sup> Such supranational inequalities are replicated at all levels of society including at universities and ways of producing knowledge where STEM disciplines and ways of knowing have attained a higher status and are better-resourced than HSSA disciplines.

The Charter for Humanities and Social Sciences developed just over a decade ago made a valiant attempt to address some of these systemic asymmetries in higher education along the fault-lines of race, gender, ethnicity, disability, sexual orientation, xenophobia, and class, but notably in the domain of knowledge production to redefine the importance and role of HSSA for a democratic and equal South African society. In its preamble, the Charter introduces an idealised student in a STEM field, conversant and reliant on the so-called ‘soft skills’ often attributed to the Humanities and Social Sciences, multilingual, critical thinking, interested in and tolerant of cultural diversity, widely read in the poetry and prose of the continent and diaspora, deeply appreciative of indigenous art forms and heritage to distract from the ‘complicated equations about the stress modulus in variegated metals’. While the Charter presents several lofty recommendations, what is somewhat disconcerting is that Humanities and Social Sciences seem to be viewed through the lens of the uncontested predominance of the STEM fields and although it is explicitly stated that they should not be mere adjuncts to the Natural Sciences, it seems to be the role in which they were inadvertently cast.<sup>2</sup>

The task team envisioned ‘that our institutions and our academic community will be an equal partner in the world’s knowledge production and dissemination alongside centres of excellence in the North and Global South’. The Charter proposed six ambitious interventions to strengthen the HSSA as fields of inquiry such as recruiting postgraduate African students to South African institutions, and to create quality assurance structures to enhance the recognition of local journals and evaluate the quality of book/chapter contributions. The Charter highlighted key critiques of the rewards system in higher education, which is skewed against scholars working in the fields of HSSA and promised to review the funding formulae, not only for institutions, but to review the reward system for research productivity where book manuscripts, book chapters, and creative outputs such as performance and sustainable community practices would gain recognition (E1 and E2). The Charter also undertook a review of the NRF in recognition that the reward structure is heavily skewed towards the Natural Sciences (E3). The Charter therefore illustrated a clear intention to critically assess the knowledge production architecture and superstructure governing higher education in South Africa to place HSSA disciplines on a more equal footing with STEM disciplines.<sup>3</sup>

Africa and South Africa's knowledge project is intricately entangled with the broader processes of global knowledge creation, research, and dissemination. In global terms, Africa is not considered a major producer of scholarship, with African academia often critiqued for producing far less scientific publications than the rest of the world, although its contributions have risen significantly in the last two decades and was estimated around 7.6% between 2001 and 2018 up from 0.7% in 1996. On the African continent, South Africa holds the top rank for scientific knowledge production with nearly a quarter of all African publications followed by Egypt, but these cut across natural and medical sciences.<sup>4</sup> For the Social Sciences, Humanities and Arts (HSSA), Ogega et al. estimate the African contributions to HSSA global outputs (peer reviewed journal articles, books) at about 5% (from bibliometric data) with approximately half coming from Southern Africa.<sup>5</sup> When Africa's marginality in terms of scientific scholarship over the last few decades is discussed, little mention is made of the brain drain from Africa due to the destruction of African universities after structural readjustment programmes in the late Twentieth Century. It seems almost self-evident that the higher education sphere in Africa is in a post-recovery phase and needs to be populated with a cohort of young, critical scholars producing HSSA scholarship on and from Africa. The Charter's call for the enhanced recognition of local and other journals (from the Global South) by international accreditation bodies to make it attractive for scholars to publish in them speaks to the theme of 'decolonising knowledge production' to not only deconstruct the asymmetries between knowledge production between the Global North and South with particular reference to the powerful role played by publishers from the Global North, but to consider the politics surrounding publications and the pressure scholars face to publish in Q1 journals (meaning eschewing journals and publishers from the Global South). The goal of the envisaged colloquium would be to bring together scholars from different traditions, local editors, and publishers to speak about the challenges experienced, but also ways to potentially try to level the playing field, to make Africa a net producer of knowledge directly and not only mediated through the academic publishing superstructure from the Global North.

The Charter highlighted the problems of externally driven criteria of institutional wellness, notably university rankings and the pressure South African institutions face to play the rankings game in a globalised academia and what it means for HSSA scholarship. Generally, wellness factors are external criteria in reference to increased research productivity, publication in accredited journals (preferably international), increasing reputational excellence of institutions, improving postgraduate enrolments relative to undergraduate cohorts, and improving staff-student ratios, but these external criteria do not always speak to institutional contexts on the ground. In terms of recognition systems, universities tend to follow a differentiated approach with vast differences in approaches across the sector, which tend to privilege external criteria of wellness, such as publishing in high profiled journals from the Global North at the cost of enhancing the profile of local and African journals and book publications, which is more common in HSSA areas. The Charter called for recognition of the uniqueness of scholarship in the Social Sciences, Humanities and Arts and for rewards systems to reflect this uniqueness, instead of following a one-size-fits-all approach skewed in favour of the STEM areas. Book and chapter contributions were to be subjected to a national panel for approval or rejection while performance contributions would equally be adjudicated by a committee.<sup>6</sup>

One of the caveats mentioned for book contributions is the role of major international book publishers and their adherence to market and commercial considerations over scholarly ones, but this also reflects a STEM mindset, where major scientific breakthroughs rarely become the subject of book projects, which is different in the HSSA. The key issue highlighted revolved around the peer review process to determine the scholarly contribution of a book or chapter contribution. Since the Charter's development, book and chapter contributions have been recognised, but not always consistently as the weighting of such contributions have varied in the period in question and it is becoming increasingly hard to meet the DHET requirements for peer review and scholarly justification. However, the Charter cautioned against following European systems where rewards systems and quality assurance are directly linked and the one (quality) justifies the other (rewards). Such systems set the market law of value above everything else, including scholarship, which should be

independent and not dictated by economic concerns. Increasingly, the language of higher education has taken on business and corporate metaphors, where students are clients and where post-secondary education has to have a utilitarian, vocational function. This is problematic in HSSA fields where many areas of study do not naturally lend itself to a vocation, which then raises questions about 'relevance' in the name of 'graduate attributes'. Such mindsets may render HSSA fields increasingly fragile, when they are largely responsible for facilitating human higher order thinking (critical analysis) and creativity and the development of big ideas and ways to understand the world rather than training for a vocation.<sup>7</sup>

The Charter mentioned the dominance of Eurocentric content in curricula, which is directly linked to decolonisation debates associated with the Fallist Movements which proliferated from 2015. The Charter called for a reassessment of Africa's historical accounts and complexities, and to 'define a dignified, postimperial and post-colonial relationship to the world of knowledge' (and we would argue gender sensitive) while being cognisant of the fact that HSSA scholarship has been relegated to a supporting role in a higher education environment focusing on innovation and economic relevance privileging scholarship and its awards according to the STEM model, which is less conducive to HSSA scholarship. The express goal of the Charter was to envision a more equitable model inclusive of HSSA incorporating curricula content responsive to local African and gender contexts. The Charter also envisioned modes of internationalisation following increasingly South-South collaboration and recruiting postgraduate students from the African continent to pursue Master's and PhD studies in HSSA in South Africa (part of the African Renaissance Development Programme). Many of the issues foregrounded in the Charter would become the burning issues of the Fallist Movements and this brings us to the heart of decolonisation debates in HSSA at South African and African institutions to reflect on knowledge production in Africa and to emphasise knowledge production responsive to local contexts. This means that universities should recognise their situatedness in their immediate contexts and to develop and offer programmes that meet the needs within its local context.<sup>8</sup>

One of the findings of the Charter report still holds relevance today, namely concerns by academic staff around the new 'punitive managerialism' beginning to govern university environments at the cost of conducive research environments, academic freedom and integrity, and safe spaces for open debate. In a harbinger of what was to come, the report furthermore emphasised the anger of students who feel alienated at institutions of higher education leading to direct conflict and that care should be taken to listen to their concerns. It is evident that the Charter for the Humanities and Social Sciences tried to address critical issues and systemic asymmetries at HEIs already a decade ago, but many of the same issues became keystones for the sector wide protests from 2015, which may be attributed to the slow pace of change or even outright failures of the goals of the Charter. A decade since the Charter came into existence, it is time to appraise the state of Humanities, Social Sciences and Arts within the broader knowledge production architecture governing higher education in South Africa, more so since the extreme volatility at HEIs since 2015, as well as the seemingly increased corporatisation at South African universities.<sup>9</sup>

<sup>1</sup> De Sousa Santos, B. 2007. Preface. In: B. De Sousa Santos (Ed.). *Another Knowledge is Possible: Beyond Northern Epistemologies*. London: Verso. vii-xvii.

<sup>2</sup> Report Commissioned by the Minister of Higher Education & Training for the Charter for Humanities and Social Sciences. Final report 30 June 2022.

<sup>3</sup> See 2.

<sup>4</sup> Sooryamoorthy, R. 2021. Science in Africa: Contemporary trends in research. *Journal of Scientometric Research*, 10(3): 366-372.

Mouton, M. 2010. The state of social science in sub-Saharan Africa. 2010 World Social Science Report Knowledge Divides background paper. Paris: UNESCO.

<sup>5</sup> Ogega, O.M., Majani, M., Hendricks, C., Adegun, O., Mbatudde, M., Muyanja, C., Atekyereza, P., Hugue, N.N., & Gyasi, R.M. 2023. Research capacity strengthening in Africa: Perspectives from the social sciences, humanities and arts. *Scientific Africa*, 20(2023): e01708.

<sup>6</sup> Report Commissioned by the Minister of Higher Education & Training for the Charter for Humanities and Social Sciences. Final report 30 June 2022.

<sup>7</sup> See 6.

<sup>8</sup> Report Commissioned by the Minister of Higher Education & Training for the Charter for Humanities and Social Sciences. Final report 30 June 2022.

<sup>9</sup> See 8.



### The questions that the proposed colloquium would like to answer are:

- To what extent have the goals of the Charter to create a more equitable knowledge production system been achieved?
- What is the current state of the HSSA against the background of decolonisation debates since 2015?
- What is the relative state of HSSA in knowledge production architecture and systems in the South African academy?
- What are the key challenges for HSSA in relation to an enhanced focus on vocational training and graduate attributes?
- How best can we overcome asymmetries in the knowledge production and dissemination domain?

### SUB-THEMES FOR POTENTIAL ROUNDTABLES

- How far have we come?' Reflections on the impact of the Charter.
- 'A view from the Deaneries': South African Deans (of HSSA Faculties) (SAHUDA–South African Humanities Deans Association) on the state of Humanities and Social Sciences a decade after the Charter and its impact on ten years of knowledge production.
- 'Leveling the publications playing field': Publishers' forum on the challenges of playing the publications game. How can knowledge production (publications) from the Global South be enhanced?
- 'Balancing act': Reflections from Vice-Rectors (Research) and representatives from DHET on the challenges of meeting sector wide external 'wellness' factors in relation to research and scholarship with 'decolonisation' demands to enhance knowledge production in the Global South.

### SUB-THEMES FOR PARALLEL PANELS

- The politics of 'publish or perish' in HSSA fields.
- Knowledge production and power: Exorcising the ghosts of coloniality in the South African academic publication and recognition system.
- What does increased managerialism mean for academic freedom at universities?
- The rhetoric of vocationalism: Graduate attributes – helpful or harmful for the HSSA?
- The responsiveness of HSSA curricula to decolonisation pressures and local contexts.
- Knowledge production asymmetries between the Global North and South: Perspectives from the Global North and South.
- Decolonising knowledge production: Gender perspectives.

### COLLOQUIUM FORMAT

- In person (on Bfn campus)
- Duration: 2–3 days with keynotes, roundtables, panels (parallel sessions)
- Roundtable discussion: 90 minutes
- Individual paper presentations (parallel panels): 20 minutes with 10–minute discussion time
- Dates: **27–29 August 2024**

### GUIDELINES FOR SUBMISSIONS

- Abstracts for both proposed roundtables or individual presentations (parallel panels) should be submitted
- Applicants should indicate whether they propose to convene a roundtable or wish to make an individual presentation in a themed panel session
- Roundtable abstracts should indicate the general theme and the name of all participants
- Abstract length: 250 words
- All abstract submissions must include a short biography (150 words) of all participants (roundtable and panel sessions)
- Submit abstracts and registration forms to: [cgas@ufs.ac.za](mailto:cgas@ufs.ac.za).
- Please indicate 'roundtable submission' or 'panel submission' clearly in the subject line

## REGISTRATION

- Conference fee: R2 500 (VAT inclusive)
- Prospective attendees will be issued with an invoice including banking details for payment of conference fee and registration form when notified of abstract acceptance. Conference registration will be handled by the professional conference organiser for this event, Spotted Apple.

## IMPORTANT DATES

- Deadline for submission of abstracts: **15 June 2024**
- Notification of acceptance of abstracts: **15 July 2024**
- Deadline for registration [& payment] **15 August 2024**

## DISCLAIMER

The colloquium organisers and its subcontractors do not accept responsibility for damage and/or loss of any kind which may be incurred by conference attendees or any persons accompanying them.

Speakers' comments during the conference are in no way binding on the organisers.

Please note, limited spaces are available, so early confirmation of attendance/participation would be important.

## CONTACT DETAILS

*NB: Please use 'UFS Colloquium' in the subject line for any email correspondence.*

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