



## For humanity's sake let's restore the humanities

**In conversation with Vasu Reddy about the HSRC's role in fulfilling its mandate to promote research in the field of human sciences to improve an understanding of social conditions, and the process of social change.**

### What are the 'humanities'?

The humanities are academic disciplines that study the human condition, using methods that are primarily analytical, critical, or speculative, as distinguished from the mainly empirical approaches of the natural sciences.

The humanities include ancient and modern languages, literature, history, philosophy, religion, and visual and performing arts such as music and theatre. The humanities that are also regarded as social sciences include history, anthropology, area studies, communication studies, cultural studies, law and linguistics.

Source: [www.wikipedia.org](http://www.wikipedia.org)

In 2011, two reports on the decline of the humanities and social sciences in South Africa appeared within a month of each other, pointing to a crisis in this field of study with student numbers in these subjects dropping at an alarming rate: namely the Academy of Science of South Africa (ASSAf) report and the Charter for the Humanities and Social Sciences (CHCC).

The ASSAf report expressed concern about the 'intellectual stagnation' in the humanities over the last 15 years, posing the single most important threat to the growth of intellectually vibrant scholarship in the humanities, whereas the CHCC report noted 'extremely worrying signs of decline that need to be arrested and reversed as a matter of urgency given the important role the humanities have to play in our society'.

### Why are the humanities important?

The humanities mirror and reflect society and culture. If we look at the early writings of Wally Serote, Siphiso Sepamla, Mafika Gwala, they remind us not only about the experiences under apartheid, but also how, as writers, they mobilised audiences and drove the momentum for change through their writing.

In considering Mazisi Kunene, we remember not just the writer of great epics such as *Emperor Shaka the Great* and *Anthem of the Decader*, but one who was able to be cosmopolitan, national and socially relevant beyond the period in which he wrote.

Ingrid Jonker, an Afrikaans poet who died in the sixties, was cited by President Mandela in her classic poem 'The Child', written in the wake of Sharpeville to remind us about her insight into South African township life, as well as about our task to instil a common humanity that transcends violence. This also helps us to see our challenges and problems in creative and critical ways and should compel us to ask questions about ourselves visually, musically and through performance in a holistic way.

### So, why are the humanities on the decline?

Since the nineties universities have tended to emphasise vocations, which implies the training of experts focused on the use and purpose of skills, such as engineers, chartered accountants, the medical profession, and others. This in itself is not bad, but the emphasis became strongly aligned to application in a narrow way.

The global financial crisis had an impact on funding; competition for resources has increased; and there is a perception that training in the humanities does not guarantee jobs.

There is also a belief that methods to conduct research in the humanities are time consuming and results are perceived to lack an evidence base because they do not provide statistics and numbers that quantify facts. The qualitative nature of humanities methods is seen by some as ineffectual in the face of 'hard science' research.

As a result, policy makers are sometimes reluctant to accept outcomes of qualitative research as 'authoritative' and therefore claim that it is insubstantial.

But contrary to popular perception, the majority of humanities graduates are indeed employed because the training they receive is broad enough to enable them to speak, write, and think laterally, making them ideally suited for and adaptable to most jobs.



The funding formula in higher education tends to favour science and technology subjects over humanities, which partially explains the decline. This formula should be changed. While science and technology subjects drive economic development, the humanities in turn take up the problems that science and technology throw at us. Poor working conditions, poverty and inequalities, communicable diseases, women's and workers' rights, population growth, changing structure of families are issues addressed by social sciences and humanities that feed into social policies as well.

### What are the recommendations to restore the humanities?

There are many proposals, but the most concrete proposals include a council with statutory standing to advise government on how to improve the status of the humanities; and doing a review of government funding allocations to humanities. The areas requiring special attention are African languages, creative and performing arts, philosophy, and history; and better and stronger integration of the humanities into government policy into tertiary teaching, policy making and research in humanities.

The reports also propose a dedicated national fund for humanities research; the establishment of centres of excellence and researcher chairs to build capacity for future humanities scholars. At the public level, the value of the humanities requires more coverage through major awards, televised lectures, and a national medal for humanities. All of these are great ideas but require resources, active collaboration and leadership at several levels.

### How does the HSRC respond to these two studies since our core function is social sciences and humanities research?

The HSRC should lead and drive the humanities. We believe the formation of another institute for the humanities implies duplication of what we already do. The HSRC has a national mandate to play a leadership role in respect of reinvigorating the humanities in longitudinal projects with a strong interdisciplinary focus, as well as public engagement in national conversations.

We have introduced a series of lectures that bring high-calibre scholars, policy makers, business and activist leaders, writers and

artists to speak on topics of relevance in the arts and humanities. The series recognises a broad and specialised audience to share compelling perspectives, experiences and ideas that show intersections across the hard and soft sciences to highlight intellectual enquiry, creative expression and free debate.

We use these forums to ask speakers to stimulate debate on pertinent topics that we as a council should also engage in our research. We are exploring ideas on research impact in the humanities and social sciences within the institution. We are focusing on morality and issues of healing and restitution in the context of our divided histories across race and heritage. We are also beginning work that explores the value and meaning of art and social justice in South Africa. For example, we are asking what role art has played post 1994 in healing the wounds of the past and promoting social justice and national transformation. We ask how art has contributed to social justice; and we ask what the building blocks of our nation are, and what facilitates and what restricts our nation building attempts.

Answers to these questions may help to restore the human dimension of our experience as South Africans.

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The original artwork of this illustration was done by John Velickovic when he was seven years old. This was awarded a 2nd place prize in the category for Grades K, 1-2 by the Cray-Pas Wonderful, Colorful World Contest in 2001. He is currently in his second year, studying towards a Bachelor's degree for Studio Art at the University of California, Irvine, USA.





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