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## Professional Reports:

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# The National Research Foundation and priorities for critical research

Peter Alexander  
Department of Sociology, Rand Afrikaans University  
*pa@rau.ac.za*

*Editor's note: The following article is the final section of a 'thought paper' entitled 'Contexts, comparison and critical research' prepared for the National Research Foundation (NRF), the main state-funded agency supporting academic research in the natural and social sciences. It is included here as part of our ongoing debate on how to strengthen South African sociology, and we welcome responses in the form of publishable letters. The full paper, which was one of a number commissioned by the NRF, is available from the author. At present, NRF research funding is structured around nine inter-disciplinary 'focus areas', including one called 'Challenge of Globalisation: Perspectives from the Global South,' which the author was involved developing.*

What research should the NRF be supporting? A major problem is to encourage projects in new areas. Institutional pressure, including funding priorities, can easily produce conservatism. For various reasons, researchers themselves can be a source of the problem (I will return to this), but so too can funders. In my view, the NRF is right to have a combination of predetermined foci, but also to support researchers in the development of new areas. In the social sciences especially, the critical issues can change quite quickly and the predetermined foci will not be able to keep up with this, or, if they do, they will change too frequently to be useful. On the other hand, leaving everything to the researchers will mean we miss opportunities to move research into areas regarded as priorities. It is to be greatly welcomed that the NRF is now opening up a debate about what these areas should be.

Arguably, however, the present system is both too focussed and insufficiently focussed. It may be administratively convenient to have nine – or roughly nine – focus areas, with roughly similar numbers of projects coming under each manager, but this might not be good for research. If, as is the case at present, two of the areas are effectively 'open' to any proposals, it would be better to have a section that is clearly marketed as such, thus making it easier for referees, selection panellists and managers to compare all proposals against the others. As for the other seven areas, they actually seem rather broad. If they were narrower they might be more productive, with researchers able to co-operate in bouncing ideas off each other. Within the 'globalisation' focus area, I proposed that there should be a conference of all those working on NRF-funded projects, and

possibly others working on related topics in South Africa. This could have allowed us all to benefit from the latest findings and methods, avoid unnecessary overlaps, pinpoint synergies, and consider new agendas. Such an approach would be easier and probably more productive with tighter foci. It may be that some foci would attract more projects and greater funding than others, but, in terms of research priorities, this might not be a bad thing. Related to this idea, we probably need greater participation from senior researchers in the management of particular foci (which would be smaller than the present ones), and/or better qualified managers. It might be worth looking at the way the UK's Economic and Social Research Council handles this. In general, managers should at least have a doctorate, and the NRF should be encouraging its more junior professional staff to obtain such qualifications.

We should continue to support those sub-fields where South Africans are playing a leading role internationally. Within sociology and allied disciplines, this certainly applies to industrial sociology, or more precisely to labour studies. From the conferences I attend and other direct feed-back, it is clear that, in particular, the Sociology of Work Programme (SWOP) at Wits has built up a significant international reputation. Whatever the conclusions drawn by the programme's members, this should not detract from a recognition of the valuable role SWOP has played over the years, or its ability to formulate interesting new questions, especially now in relation to work outside the formal sector and the growth of social movements.

In terms of new sub-fields, we should focus support on areas where there are socially and politically significant problems but, where possible, encourage research on projects that extend our theoretical knowledge, rather than just policy-related work. Other agencies back work that is immediately and directly relevant to policy, but if South African research is to make a qualitative advance the NRF's support for pure research is crucial. Focussing attention on problems that are especially marked in South Africa can help us to make a significant impact internationally as well as locally.

The most obvious example here is HIV/AIDS. Because the problem hit Africa earlier and harder than other continents, we are now in a position to make a contribution internationally. This became clear to me from a recent conference in Delhi, where I sat through a paper on research of the kind being pursued in South Africa three years ago. In criticising the researcher's lack of knowledge of the international literature, I had to acknowledge that we had made similar mistakes in South Africa, failing to learn from still earlier research north of the Limpopo. It would be worth doing a study on the lessons we can learn from mistakes made with AIDS research, for I am convinced that these have been numerous. For far too long, and still in some measure, the problem was conceived in biological rather than social terms, conditioning the thinking of scholars as well as funding priorities. This has meant that social scientists and the NRF did too little too late. We have also allowed ourselves to be trapped by epistemologies and narrow policy orientations that have meant we frequently did the wrong kind of research (see the introduction to *Society in Transition* 33(3), 2002). Moreover, if our experience at RAU is anything to go by, good work has sometimes been suffocated by vested interests, political competition, academic jealousy, fears of 'bad' publicity, and the irresponsibility of some funders (though

not the NRF). Some of these factors have contributed to our own failure to extend our work on students into a national survey, despite the fact that we pioneered the use of saliva testing as a research tool, that our work was regarded as theoretically significant, and that, if findings in other tertiary institutions were similar to those for RAU, it had significant implications for understandings of social conditions affecting the spread of the infection, as well as for economic planning.

There is much important work still to be done in relation to HIV/AIDS. Despite the HSRC's study, debate continues about levels of infection, especially as it affects particular sectors, and this has various implications. However, we need to run faster to catch up with the new threats that are being posed. Some of the most interesting research being undertaken by our MA students has been on AIDS. One looked at the role that hospices are playing, in home-based as well as traditional residential care, revealing that, despite the value of this support, it is available to only a tiny fraction of HIV/AIDS patients. Another has looked at thoughts about death among mine workers dying of AIDS, and yet another student is working on the impact of an HIV/AIDS identity in overcoming stigma. Work such as this is tough, and should be given added encouragement.

Another topic that requires greater attention, and on which we should be making more of an impact, is crime, clearly still a more massive problem in South Africa than in most other countries, despite recent reports of improvement. I suspect that it is not just in relation to AIDS that we have suffered from denial, it is also on crime, often leaving the field open to inadequately researched, right-wing assumptions. Yet another issue is inequality. There is a tendency to focus on poverty, which is far worse in many other countries, rather than on inequality, where South Africa is a world leader. Other issues on which we are worryingly weak, at least within South African sociology, are urban sociology (there are now no urban sociologists in either of our biggest city's universities), sport (which will gain greater prominence with the World Cup coming to South Africa), and technology (we know little about the way in which cell phones, email and the internet are affecting the way in which we live our lives in South Africa, though this is clearly significant).

Whilst some of these topics have been raised in relation to sociology, if they are to be linked to NRF foci they should be addressed by means of inter-disciplinary research. Moreover, as already argued, all these issues would benefit from internationally comparative study. Research by South African researchers in other countries and collaboration with non-South African researchers must both be encouraged. The co-operation agreement with India should be extended from the natural sciences to cover the social sciences, and the NRF should attempt to secure similar agreements with, in particular, China and Brazil. We should not wait for our researchers to learn Chinese. English is becoming increasingly popular in China, and universities in Hong Kong can provide a valuable bridge to the mainland (the territory's universities tending to be better resourced than our own). There are also openings here for universities and departments to initiate their own collaboration. Whilst comparative study, including research within our region, should be 'mainstreamed', it might be worth giving the movement a boost through a particular focus on something like 'South Africa and the wider world'.

Moving away from specific issues, the NRF and the universities should continue and, if possible, extend their support for attendance at international conferences. There is sometimes a tendency for administrators to see the value of these as an opportunity to receive peer criticism on papers so that these might be improved for publication. Whilst the significance of this should not be downplayed, in my experience conferences have been important in more profound ways. For instance, I would not have published on apartheid and China had I not attended a conference in Hong Kong; I would not have appreciated the importance of or possibilities for re-conceiving 'class' had I not been to Delhi; I would not have grasped the limitations as well as strengths of 'northern' scholarship without attending 'northern' conferences; my knowledge of recent literature in my field and purchase of books would have been much more restricted without access to conference bookstalls; and my grasp of social dynamics in different parts of the world would have been much more limited without international conferences, notably in Zimbabwe, China and Japan. Without attendance at international conferences it is impossible for our researchers to build an international reputation, and international conferences have become a more important part of my intellectual development and ability to conceive of new research the more I have gained experience and seniority. However, we all have to start somewhere, and funding should certainly be made available to doctoral students who have research to report (though not, I think, below that level). Further, international visits feed back into improved teaching and to invitations to international scholars to participate in our seminars, conferences and research. Finally, those colleagues who lament the low level of attendance at conferences in Africa north of the Limpopo are right, and the NRF could do more to publicise such events.

Another strength of the NRF has been its emphasis on linking high quality research with capacity development. I was not keen on the decision to hook most student funding to focus area research, and this may have been taken too far. Nevertheless, in my department we have been able to use such support to develop an MA programme, with 7 to 13 new students working on masters' degrees in each of the past three years. This has meant that good students – most of whom have been black – have been able to undertake further study that would otherwise have been denied, and all our MA students have gained from being part of something that might be considered a critical mass. As a consequence of work at this level, we are now trying to construct a doctoral programme, but, even more than at masters' level, the main inhibitor is funding. We would like to secure support for doctoral internships, whereby students would broaden their experience, strengthen their CVs and reduce their isolation by undertaking a small amount of teaching or research on non-doctoral projects. However, each intern costs about R80,000, just for their bursary. The NRF's recent increase in its support for senior post-graduates was, without doubt, a valuable move in the right direction, but it would help if it were taken further. In particular, from my experience, I cannot see a justification for the NRF continuing to fund undergraduate students. There is not a significant problem in retaining students at this level (including black students), and anyway loans and alternative funding are available. The money that the NRF spends on undergraduates would be better used on doctoral students.

The NRF seems to operate on the basis that the very best students should have access to a free-standing bursary, and be able to use this at any university, whereas the others should have their research shaped by a particular focus area project. My preference would be for all doctoral bursaries to be free-standing. Any student who reaches this level is very good, if not excellent. They not only need the space to follow their own interests, assuming they can obtain supervision, but it will be from among these students that we will develop much of the expertise that will take us beyond the limited range of our current research base. Here is an example where our present system of research funding encourages conservatism. Further, the primary condition for support of overseas study by the NRF should not be excellence – though merit must still be a factor – rather such study should be aimed at developing priority areas in which we currently lack expertise. This logic also applies to the Commonwealth and other sponsors. I have come across South African students in Britain who, in my view, would receive better supervision in South Africa, and at a fraction of the cost. This is not just about the knowledge of the supervisors, it can also be about quality of relevant library sources, access to research sites and data, being part of a group of students and staff working on similar subjects, and avoiding equipping highly-qualified students with the desire and ability to remain overseas. By contrast, if, for instance, a student were serious about undertaking at least some of their research on China or India or Brazil or certain African countries where we lack expertise, and they had the ability to do such work, they would need support for study outside South Africa.

The Commonwealth Scholarship Commission has recently initiated a split-site programme, whereby doctoral students spend some of their time in their home country and some in the UK or another commonwealth country. They can register at either end and are provided with supervisors in each of two institutions. This can provide valuable overseas exposure, access to overseas libraries and supervision in areas, or aspects of areas, we do not cover. Moreover, the contact with overseas supervisors can improve the quality of our own supervision, allow us to deepen an understanding of South African society among foreign scholars and encourage international collaboration in new areas. This programme should be widened and our government should be encouraged to participate directly, perhaps by focussing attention on co-operation with other African countries. Perhaps, too, some of the NRF's support for overseas bursaries should be used in this way.

In passing, I am not convinced of the utility of the Human Sciences Research Council (HSRC). It is not clear whether this institution is about government research, consultancy work for business, or capacity development. Some senior staff members are, compared to similarly qualified university researchers, paid outrageously large sums of money. Moreover, for interns, the pressure to undertake commercial work, and the separation of this from MA and doctoral supervision, means that capacity development is often unsatisfactory. Moreover there is little or no co-ordination between HSRC research and that backed by the NRF. Is it time for the government to rethink its support for the HSRC, and to consider whether funds could be spent more productively in other ways? The government research could be undertaken in-house or farmed out to universities and, if necessary, consultancy firms, and a similar argument applies to the commercial research. Key

researchers would be able to return to universities, where they could make a more significant impact on capacity development through research centres that relate directly to supervision, and through participation in, for instance, seminars and conferences.

One problem we face, at least at RAU, is that of developing a research culture. Five years ago, staff often had tea or lunch together, and used this as an opportunity to share ideas, sometimes about research. Now, this rarely ever happens – everyone is just too busy! Also, within our university there is no inter-departmental common room, where, for instance, we might meet natural scientists and swap thoughts with them. One important advance in my own department has been the development of our research seminar. It gathers weekly on a Friday evening, and between 2000 and 2003 it met on 100 occasions. The speakers include a wide spectrum, from MA students to major international scholars, and these come from a range of disciplines. Attendance includes academics and students from other departments and universities, and journalists, NGO researchers and civil society leaders. An important feature of the seminar is the socialising afterwards, thus combining formal academic discussion, based mainly on pre-circulated papers, with informal conversations about our work and topical issues. What makes this a success are four components: the commitment of all members of the department, a decent-sized group of senior students, various forms of persuasion applied to leading intellectuals (this is never financial), and funding from the university. We receive less than R25,000 per annum, but with this we pay for one return flight per term from somewhere in southern Africa, refreshments and papers. This is the best use of research money that I know.

Another related problem is that, in common with most South African academics, I do not get the time to read (except of course for teaching and current research). This is significant, because it obviously inhibits one's ability to think about changing the direction of one's work. The only occasion when it is possible to significantly overcome this problem is during a sabbatical. Fortunately, where it is adequately justified by an individual and his or her department, our faculty supports 12 months paid leave every sixth year. We very much hope that this will continue, because it is the only real opportunity we have for serious scholarship, including the writing of books. Similarly, the NRF should continue to provide financial assistance so that its senior, funded researchers can spend some time at other institutions, hopefully, among other things, re-tooling themselves for novel research. The downside of sabbaticals is that, at least at RAU, replacement teaching is inadequately funded, placing even greater stresses on colleagues, sometimes leading to departments being unwilling to support time off.

Our department has developed a small research centre, the Centre for Sociological Research (CSR). This only employs one junior researcher, but it does provide a means of raising some research funding and of encouraging research within the department. The main practical barriers to extending our capacity are lack of office space for the CSR and lack of funding for administrative assistance. The former problem is one that our university must address. The latter problem means, in practice, that I spend much time doing clerical work, administering bursaries and fieldwork funds for twenty to thirty students and seven staff, as well as organising seminars, workshops, courses etc. This is activity that would be better undertaken by somebody who costs less and has limited or no research experi-

ence, thereby freeing me to provide research leadership and raise funds. The NRF could assist with this latter problem, which must affect other senior researchers as well, perhaps by funding administrative support for small centres, and not just backing larger 'centres of excellence'.

Some comment should be made about the NRF's rating of research, which among social scientists is probably more controversial than any other of its activities. The present system involves a model that may have worked with natural scientists, but is inappropriate for social science. Natural scientists investigate a natural world that is largely universal – H1 viruses, brains, bridges, stars and so on are pretty much universally the same – and relatively static in their character. This makes it possible to assess standards of work on an international basis, and in a more or less objective manner. Social scientists confront a social world that changes rapidly and is different in every part of the world, ensuring that it is a much more contested division of knowledge, lacking in 'eureka moments', and impossible to have an accurate or agreed sense of individual ability. Moreover, publication in international journals is not necessarily an indication of quality. If I want to communicate with colleagues in South Africa or the region, it makes more sense to publish in a local journal, which, locally, will have a larger readership than any international publication; this is especially true when most international journals, especially the better ones, are so slow to publish. Following his 2003 visit to South Africa, Michael Burawoy, President of the American Sociological Association, addressed the NRF on the rating problem as follows:

[I]ncentivizing publication in Western journals will draw [researchers] away from contributing to the ever more pressing social problems facing South Africa. It would be better to bring foreign academics (not just from the North but also from the South) to engage with and if need be evaluate South African research projects. Best of all would be to show confidence in local academics, letting them evaluate their own discipline, and encouraging them to create a strong national association.

There are other problems. Natural scientists tend to operate in teams, so that the work of their students is reflected in joint publication. This happens much less in the social sciences, where the impact of academics among their students is felt more in dissertations; but these are given little or no weight in the rating exercise. Moreover, good social scientists engage with public opinion, making their research available in popular journals; but, again, this counts for nothing when it comes to ratings. Further, in general, the publication of monograph books is much more appropriate for social scientists than for natural scientists, but the government's emphasis on accredited journals discourages such important work, causing a rift between what our peers internationally might regard as valuable and what our universities pressurise us to do. Lastly, but of great significance, the system is inherently conservative, pushing researchers to remain within their established field, rather than branch out. For instance, I am faced with the dilemma of sticking rigidly to work within comparative labour studies, which is what makes sense in terms of ratings, or doing at least some of my research in more immediately pressing areas, such as AIDS.

Many social scientists feel that the present system of rating was imposed by a natural science-dominated NRF without adequate consultation. This has not only produced a deficient rating system, it has also led, very unhelpfully, to some mistrust between leading

researchers and the NRF. It is time to heal this breach. I would appeal to my fellow social scientists to recognise that the rating system's emphasis on individuals – rather than on departments or other collectivities (which in sociology we would have preferred) – is here to stay for the foreseeable future. We should, though, attempt to transform the system into something more satisfactory. I also urge the NRF to open a debate on a better way to measure the quality of social scientists' research. This should be based on what social scientists say, and assessments should be undertaken on the basis of genuine peer review (that is, without the intervention of natural scientists, who, even if they are sensitive, will tend to make judgements on the basis of criteria that work for them).

Finally, it is necessary to say something on the question of pay. My own department has had some experience of 'growing your own timber', of recruiting some of our best black and women students as junior academics, and hence researchers. Our problem has been that of encouraging them to move into the middle levels of academia. There are various difficulties in these situations. Occasionally there are unsympathetic colleagues; sometimes there is lack of confidence in a very competitive environment; in the short-term there can appear to be more challenging jobs elsewhere; and the hours of work are long. Mentoring, including emotional support, can help with some of these problems, and in some institutions, certainly RAU, the pressure of work needs to be addressed. But, the biggest issue by far is low pay! Unless an academic has a partner with a well-paid job, below the level of senior lecturer they cannot begin, for instance, to buy a house and will be pressed by friends and family to earn more money. Nor would reshuffling salary budgets be a solution, because senior academics also feel that their living standards are declining, both in real terms and in relation to their contemporaries, so are pushed to take on non-academic work or move out of academia altogether. Whilst there needs to be a general increase in academic pay if we are to maintain present levels of research, let alone improve them, special attention has to be given to the salaries of black academics. As a short-term measure, I would favour black colleagues being paid a special bonus, as black lecturers generally have greater pressures, both from friends who are often much more upwardly mobile, and from family commitments that are frequently greater. In practice, black academics often do command higher salaries, but it would be better to be open about this, justifying greater income gaps in terms of the real problems that we face, especially in the historically white universities. If, however, the gap between white and black pay is too large, or differentials continue for too long, it will undermine collegiality, placing black staff, in particular, in uncomfortable positions.

## **Recommendations**

Drawing on what has been said already, the following recommendations are made with the aim of improving the quality and quantity of social science research in South Africa.

1. The Department of Education should establish a committee on academic salaries. This should compare pay in universities with remunerations for similarly qualified individuals in government and business. It should also investigate the possibility of paying an additional subsidy to universities for each black academic employed.
2. The NRF should commence consultations with academics about priorities for



research funding. This should include requests for submissions from organisations representing the various disciplines and regional meetings. These consultations should include a consideration of whether it would be better to move away from the present structure based upon roughly nine focus areas.

These consultations should consider the possibility that the NRF's programmes should give weight to proposals that involve an international dimension, especially if this involves south-south co-operation, or comparative or connective research on other southern countries.

3. Thought should be given to the possibility of a focus on something like 'South Africa and the wider world: social problems, theoretical challenges and new directions.'
4. The NRF should establish a working group of social scientists to produce proposals for reforming the rating system as it applies to social scientists. This group should solicit evidence and proposals from subject associations, the relevant rating panels, individuals outside South Africa who have participated in the process, individuals who decided not to apply for a rating and those who did, South African research institutions, and other individuals and organisations that might provide useful insights. It should have access to all relevant data held by the NRF.
5. The NRF should significantly increase support for doctoral students, if necessary transferring funding from undergraduates. Support for study overseas should be limited to students undertaking work on areas that cannot be adequately supervised in South Africa. Possibilities of extending split-site, international supervision should be investigated.
6. The NRF should explore the possibility of securing funding for smaller, second-level research centres. This should be used to give support to potential centres of excellence and to provide administrative back-up to other NRF-funded research.
7. The NRF and universities should continue, and where possible expand, their support for attendance at international conferences, sabbaticals, international visitors, international collaboration, and the development of research cultures.
8. Social scientists and their associations should be encouraged to play a more active role in shaping the NRF and its various initiatives.

In general South Africa should be investing more resources in research; in particular, but not only, social science research, and in particular, but not only, academic research. This will lead to a better understanding of our world and its problems, higher quality teaching, improved policy, fewer resources being misdirected, and more innovation.

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