



RESEARCH ARTICLE

Thoughts on contemporary humanities scholarship in Nigeria

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Introduction

In his article ‘African universities and the challenge of postcolonial development’, Jeremiah Arowosegbe discusses the trajectory of universities in postcolonial Africa, drawing particularly on the experiences of public universities in Nigeria. Arowosegbe accounts for the state of the institutions against the backdrop of ‘hostile material conditions and uncongenial political control’, which continue to ‘undermine institutional autonomy and the integrity of scholarship’. This think piece reflects on the particular case of the state of humanities scholarship in Nigeria in the face of persistent onslaught on academia.

On 18 July 2024, newspapers reported that the Minister of Education, Professor Tahir Mamman, while addressing the 2024 Civil Service Week, announced a ‘fresh’ initiative of the federal government, ‘aimed at securing foreign investments into the country’s institutions of higher learning’. The minister disclosed that ‘the move aimed at conceding ownership of such institutions to foreign stakeholders with a view to opening public tertiary institutions to global investments for enhanced educational quality, infrastructure provision and innovation’. According to the minister, ‘the initiative was also conceived to re-position Nigeria as a hub for academic excellence in Africa and spontaneously generate substantial benefits, including increased funding, improved educational facilities and greater opportunities for collaboration with international educational institutions’.¹

This ‘initiative’ speaks to the continuous struggle to find solutions to the funding challenge confronting government-owned institutions in the Nigerian University System (NUS). A similar idea was briefly mooted in 2011 when the new government in Osun State proposed selling the state university (of which I was the vice-chancellor), ostensibly to relieve the state of the burden of funding the institution and to attract investors. The idea did not gain traction because of hostility towards it by many stakeholders.

¹ ‘FG to concede ownership of federal institutions to investors’, *The Explainer*, 28 June 2024. (*The Explainer* is the official newspaper of the National Orientation Agency, the federal government’s information dissemination agency.)

Gross underfunding constitutes a major problem with attendant consequences in several other key areas. However, beyond funding limitations, other challenges to research excellence include maintaining relevance in a system increasingly hostile to the humanities, methodological difficulties, the pressure to quantify impact, and the adoption by institutions of new assessment systems that seek to evaluate the worth and impact of humanities research through the lenses of science and technology.

Discipline undervaluation, maintaining relevance

The humanities, encompassing disciplines including literature, languages and linguistics, philosophy, history, religions, and visual and performing arts, are crucial for understanding the human society, condition and culture. Arowosegbe (2023) describes the glorious origins of humanities scholarship in Nigeria's first-generation universities, with a focus on the development of the disciplines of history and political science. Unfortunately, these disciplines have come under persistent assault from misguided policymaking in the Nigerian education system. Too many times, the humanities have been forced to defend their relevance in a society that lacks understanding of their role in the development of the nation.

The revision of the curriculum for secondary education had witnessed the deletion of history from the list of subjects taught in junior secondary schools with the introduction of the 6-3-3-4 system.² The deletion was just one of many assaults on the humanities instrumented by the World Bank and the International Monetary Fund's structural adjustment programmes (SAPs). The SAPs called for streamlining government funding for presumed 'non-productive' subjects and disciplines. Humanities scholars were at the forefront of intellectual and active opposition and resistance against a military government that found the SAPs valuable tools against supposedly rebellious disciplines. It took several years of engaging with different governments by the Historical Society of Nigeria before history was restored to the curriculum,³ by which time there were hardly any new history teachers being produced by the universities.

When few candidates were applying to study history, admission requirements were liberalized to accept students who had never studied the subject before entering the university. The response of many departments of history to their impending elimination was to broaden the appeal of the discipline by engaging in multidisciplinary curriculum development whereby degrees in history were awarded as combined honours with subjects such as international relations (the most popular), while the departments themselves were redesignated with such nomenclatures as 'Department of History and International Studies', 'Department of History and Strategic Studies', 'Department of History and Diplomatic Studies', etc. Only a few

² The 6-3-3-4 system (six years of primary, three years each of junior and senior secondary, and four years of tertiary education) replaced the 6-5-2-3 system (six years of primary, five years of secondary, two years of higher school and three years of tertiary education). The restructuring witnessed the overhaul of subjects offered particularly at the primary and junior secondary levels, collectively referred to as 'Basic Education'.

³ The 2009 deletion of history in the curriculum of Nigerian junior secondary schools was reversed in 2022 during the tenure of Minister of Education Adamu Adamu (cf. <<https://www.thisdaylive.com/index.php/2022/12/01/the-return-of-history-subject/>>).

history departments retain their original identities, including those at the University of Ibadan, Obafemi Awolowo University, Ile-Ife, and Ahmadu Bello University, Zaria. Even then, these departments expanded their course offerings to include combined honours programmes that appealed to more prospective students who qualify to study history not because they had the basic qualifications in history but because they qualified to study the other subject in the combination.

It was not just history that was undervalued. The assault on the humanities at the secondary level was perpetrated in different guises by various state governments, including Osun State, that disengaged the services of teachers of Yoruba language and religions between 2000 and 2003, on the grounds that there were too many of them compared with those teaching science subjects and mathematics. The disengaged teachers were reabsorbed only after 2003 when a new government took office. The 60:40 government policy that allocates 60 per cent of admission spaces in universities and of resources released to those institutions to STEM subjects (science, technology, engineering and mathematics) only served to reinforce the perception of undervaluation of the humanities. The policy remains in force.

However, the devaluation of the humanities was not just from governmental policies on admissions and funding of humanistic studies; the adverse conditions led to the collapse of many professional associations, scholarly journals, conferences and exchanges that had sustained the humanities' contributions to nation building. The direct consequence of the adversity was that many of the leading humanities scholars sought employment in Western universities and colleges, adding to the country's brain drain. Those who remained supplemented their careers with other vocations and consultancies.

Overcoming funding limitations

While underfunding affects the NUS as a whole, the impact is more severely felt in the humanities. Humanities scholars are constantly forced to defend their disciplines and make a case for their relevance in research allocation. Unlike the sciences, which have the advantage of receiving support from private institutions, international funding agencies and even industry in addition to being on the priority list for the little government funding available, the humanities frequently struggle to secure adequate financial resources. When the Tertiary Education Trust Fund (TETFund) launched the National Research Fund (NRF) initiative and issued guidelines for scholars to secure access to its funding, the humanities were completely excluded from the list of disciplines that could benefit. The Nigerian Academy of Letters had to protest against the exclusion and made representation to the leadership of TETFund before the humanities were included on the list.

The initial exclusion from the NRF cannot be separated from the perception that humanities research does not have immediate or tangible benefits, such as technological innovations or economic growth associated with the sciences and the social sciences. Compared with their colleagues in STEM and social sciences disciplines, humanities scholars in the country find it difficult to secure the necessary resources for conducting comprehensive research, attending conferences, or disseminating their findings.

Lack of access to funding for humanities research impacts the quality of research being conducted and provokes research malpractice by scholars seeking to advance in

their careers. Also, the expectation that research in the humanities must produce urgent outcomes and benefits not only undermines the innovativeness of research, it permits or instigates cost-cutting strategies in research proposals, fieldwork, writing and dissemination. This is at the root of knowledge redistribution masquerading as fresh research and data manufacture and/or falsification in lieu of the conduct of original research.

The response to this challenge lies in the rise in multidisciplinary and interdisciplinary research efforts, with scholars in the humanities engaging in research with broader appeal to mostly foreign grant-making and awarding agencies, and generally to a broader audience. By making joint applications for research funding with multidisciplinary teams, humanities scholars are able to access much-needed funds for their research. The NRF's provision for research with social impact has also facilitated this transition to multidisciplinary and interdisciplinary research by humanities scholars. To enhance the chances of emerging humanities-based scholars and researchers competing nationally and internationally for research grants, in 2023 the Nigerian Academy of Letters set up the Research, Mentoring and Capacity Building Board to coordinate initiatives aimed at capacity building of emerging and mid-career researchers. In July 2024, a grantsmanship workshop was conducted by the Academy in collaboration with scholars from the University of Birmingham in the UK and from TETFund, hosted by Osun State University. However, these efforts are minuscule compared with the scale of our requirements to reach a larger body of emerging scholars in the humanities in the country.

Methodological challenges amid pressure to quantify impact

The adoption by various universities of new assessment parameters that disproportionately favour STEM and social science disciplines has impacted humanities scholarship in the country. The deployment of assessment metrics in evaluating research contributions for promotion purposes has placed an emphasis on such parameters as 'impact factor' and 'citation counts'. These metrics make it difficult to assess the true worth of humanities research and its success and contribution to knowledge, as the humanities are often more interpretive, qualitative and even subjective. The requirement by certain institutions for a minimum percentage of research output to be the product of joint or collaborative effort also places humanities scholars who are used to 'lone' research at a disadvantage. The institutionalization of assessment conditions that humanities scholars struggle to meet has produced two types of response: first, efforts by affected scholars to prioritize research that is more likely to meet the new parameters, particularly by engaging in multidisciplinary work and collaboration, which may ultimately not be totally innovative. The second response is to engage in various forms of malpractice, including publication in predatory journals, to produce the outcome desired by the assessment parameters.

The determination of assessment procedures is strictly within the purview of an individual university's senate and its appointments and promotions committee. The Nigerian Academy of Letters seeks to work with its members who occupy leadership positions in some of these universities to encourage their institution's management to consider adopting assessment metrics that will better capture the

value of humanities research, such as impact on policymaking, contributions to public discourse, cultural influence, etc. In addition, in January 2022, the Academy conducted a methodology workshop for emerging scholars in the humanities on innovative approaches to scholarship, combining traditional methodologies with new approaches to research and adopting multidisciplinary and interdisciplinary research methods. Unfortunately, without funding support, it has been difficult to replicate this workshop and extend it to scholars yet to be reached.

In the next few paragraphs, I discuss two recent efforts aimed at reversing the slide towards research mediocrity in the country and even beyond.

African Humanities Program

The African Humanities Program (AHP) may be the most impactful international programme in promoting scholarship in the humanities in Nigeria in the last two decades. Members of the Academy were involved in it as mentors and some others as fellows. Sponsored by the Carnegie Corporation but run by the American Council of Learned Societies, AHP was implemented in five English-speaking countries – Nigeria, South Africa, Tanzania, Uganda and Ghana. The programme's initiatives are to be extended to the entire continent following its transformation in 2020 into the African Humanities Association, an academic association.

AHP set out to address some of the challenges of scholarship in Africa in general, especially funding constraints and barriers to academic mobility and mentoring. It supported pre-doctoral and post-doctoral researchers and relied on scholars on the continent as mentors. More than 500 post-doctoral fellows benefited from the programme. Nigeria accounted for the highest number of fellows and mentors. The manuscript development workshops produced book-length manuscripts for the African Humanities book series, a major achievement of the project. The networks that AHP has created among scholars from the participating countries, particularly with the residency programme that received visiting fellows, remain enduring testimonies to its impact. But much as Nigerian scholars from the country's numerous universities benefited the most from the programme, only the University of Ibadan had a residency centre, as against two in Ghana and three in South Africa.

Ife Institute of Advanced Studies

While this also is not a direct initiative of the Nigerian Academy of Letters, the Ife Institute of Advanced Studies (IIAS) is the brainchild of one of its members, Jacob Kehinde Olupona, Professor of Religions at Harvard University. Olupona trained at the University of Nigeria, Nsukka, and Boston University, where he obtained his PhD; he taught at the Obafemi Awolowo University for several years before relocating to the USA. IIAS is a pioneering academic initiative based in Ile-Ife, Nigeria. Launched in July 2017 and now in its eighth year, IIAS is designed to foster advanced research, intellectual development and some level of cultural exchange. It aims to provide emerging scholars (doctoral and fresh post-doctoral) from Nigeria and a few other African countries with a platform to engage in interdisciplinary studies, focusing initially on the humanities but, on request, extended to the STEM disciplines. Through its facilitation of high-level academic discourse and collaboration in the course of a

two-week residency, IAS seeks to contribute to global knowledge production and at the same time promote African perspectives and scholarships. Facilitators for the programme are drawn from scholars based in institutions in Africa and the global North. By focusing on methodological training, IAS is addressing the roots of scholarship by building the capacity of early career scholars to conduct quality research. The programme currently boasts over 500 fellows (alumni), representing over 150 institutions from more than 30 countries.

Nigerian Academy of Letters reclassification of disciplines

In 2022, in recognition of the fluid nature of disciplinary boundaries in recent years, the Nigerian Academy of Letters embarked on a reclassification of disciplines for the purpose of the award of its fellowships. One major outcome of the exercise was the creation of a sixth category: Interdisciplinary and Multidisciplinary Studies. This is in recognition of the observed trend among its members of the growth in scholarship in areas that transcend traditional boundaries, especially with more and more scholars in the humanities engaging in research in areas traditionally considered to belong to the social and human sciences, including Peace and Conflict Studies, and Women and Gender Studies. The first fellowship in Interdisciplinary and Multidisciplinary Studies was awarded in 2023, while two more were awarded in 2024.

Concluding remarks

Research and scholarship generally in the humanities in Nigeria have gone through different phases from the subject's origins in the mid- to late 1950s. The challenges of recent years have provoked responses that are leading to the deepening and expansion of humanities research from traditional areas to embrace interdisciplinary and multidisciplinary research, and the adoption of new methodologies hitherto considered to be within the preserve of the social sciences. The problems of funding, methodology and quality can be confronted by convincing policymakers that the humanities remain Nigeria's comparative advantage in the world's knowledge sphere, the means of national identity and legitimization for its governments, and the platform for building its social order.

It ultimately behoves scholars of the humanities to convince policymakers, university administrators, funding agencies and the broader Nigerian public about the relevance of their disciplines. Demonstrating that Nigeria's failure to generate widely accepted humanistic knowledge and consensus on its nationality, identity and future partly explains many of its current social and political crises. A vibrant scholarly community engaging in human and social discourse is critical to understanding social problems and the solutions to them. A revival of conferences, public debates, book publications, literary expositions, critical reviews and public debates will reignite humanities research and scholarship and affirm their relevance to national goals. This will also restore Nigeria's renowned literary innovativeness and theoretical expositions.

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