

The need for successful research at private higher education institutions¹

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Introduction

In 2001, HF Stander delivered a research paper at a Lecturer's Conference of the University of Pretoria with the title "*Research is only successful if it is relevant*", thus opening a debate on whether or not higher education institutions in South Africa are contributing towards international research projects and research problems on the scale they ought to be. His finding was that many South African institutions are indeed making a huge contribution towards research outputs globally, but because general basic research puts a huge financial burden on the budget of higher education institutions, many institutions don't deliver research outputs as they ought to.

In the discussion that followed the abovementioned paper, many participants raised concern about the number of private higher education institutions registered under the (by then, new) Higher Education Act of 1997, and their ability to contribute towards scientific research in general and specifically towards peer-reviewed research. It was particularly argued that government should reconsider registering any more private higher education institutions according to the Higher Education Act of 1997, because of the one fact – they are generally not research active and their respective budgets in many instances don't accommodate ongoing scientific research. The Council on Higher Education (CHE), the South African Qualifications Authority (SAQA), and the Department of Education (DoE), view research activity by both lecturers and students to be one of the fundamental aspects in deciding whether or not to approve any new programme applied for by any private higher education institution. Research projects and research funding is thus one of the core aspects of concern which dissipates growth for private higher education institutions.

¹ Paper read at the Graduation ceremony of the Institute for Christian Psychology, Germiston on 16 March 2011.

The current status of funding for research projects

How much an institution should spend on research is a question open for debate. That institutions like the Institute of Christian Psychology (ICP) and Die Afrikaanse Protestantse Akademie (APA) should be involved in research and specifically scientific research projects shouldn't be a matter for debate, its obvious. But, how to facilitate such research in a way that involves post-graduate students and in a way that don't overburden tight budgets, within the parameters of the allowed registration limits of these institutions seems to be a matter of case study in the coming years.

These facts, both the fact that an institution should involve graduates in research, as well as the fact that research costs money - and lots of it - opens a case for the study of the possibility of external funding for research projects in private higher education institutions.

According to Nelson² basic research opportunities and funding, should be open to any scholar conducting research on an approved structured model and not only to state universities and their associates. Although the context of Nelson is that of the United States, the argument should be relevant in any context. He argues that basic research should be considered a national resource for the fundamental reason that all tax payers are contributing towards the national treasury. Because the largest portion of tax income is generated by the private sector, research funding shouldn't be allocated to State Universities only, but to the private sector as well. A mind-shift like this will enable private higher education institutions to not only be research active and to collaborate towards research knowledge, but will definitely also benefit students at private higher education institutions by funding them to be research assistants for approved research projects. By funding research for private higher education institutions, government could not only benefit from the research outputs, but it can definitely play an important role in creating jobs for academically strong students as research associates and ideally later as independent researchers. But the fact of the matter is that we are currently not even close to realizing this ideal.

² Nelson, RR. 1957. *Basic Research: A national Resource* in Science and Engineering quarterly (1957), Washington (DC).

Although private higher education institutions are not funded by government at all, not even for research, the government expect of them research outputs, even sometimes on a scale compared to State Universities receiving R 80 million rand plus annually for research projects. This puts private higher education institutions at jeopardy of closing doors and pulling plugs on growth.

What is successful research?

This is why the APA and the ICP should be focused primarily on “successful research”. The question we should ask is “what is successful research”? For example, if one studies the composition of, say, the outer membrane of a virus on the right leg of the housefly at a university, you can indeed do a Doctoral thesis in Science on the subject. But the question should be pondered upon: “so what”? What does the knowledge about the composition of the outer membrane of a virus on the right leg of the house fly contribute towards general human knowledge about nature and science? I argue very little. But, a large amount of government funding of State Universities in South Africa is allocated to research. The question is if that research is successful? Meaning, is it relevant to problems and questions in the South African context today? Or is research done for the sake of research, and not necessarily because it is relevant or useful? From this angle, the debatable question arises if unsuccessful research at state universities - that is research for the sake of research, and not because it is relevant or useful - should be considered research at all, and if it should be funded by tax payers’ money at all? If we take this angle into consideration it seems plausible that government could reduce research funding to state subsidized universities and budget for at least a percentage of the annual budget to stimulate research at private higher education institutions. This will benefit you, as students, the institution, and objectively considered, it should benefit the country in general.

So to come back to the question: what is successful research? Dijkstra³ mentions three rules for successful research: i.e.

³ <http://www.cs.utexas.edu/~EWD/transcriptions/EWD06xx/EWD637.html>

- 1) the first rule is to *"Raise your quality standards as high as you can live with, avoid wasting your time on routine problems, and always try to work as closely as possible at the boundary of your abilities. Do this, because it is the only way of discovering how that boundary should be moved forward."*
- 2) The second rule is to be *"socially relevant and scientifically sound"*.
- 3) And the third rule is *"Never tackle a problem of which you can be pretty sure that (now or in the near future) it will be tackled by others who are, in relation to that problem, at least as competent and well-equipped as you." The third rule ensures that your contributions - if any! - will be unique.*

The unique opportunities for private higher education institutions

These three components of successful research according to Dijkstra underline one basic concept I'm trying to accentuate in the address today: the relevance of research. The current state of affairs bring with it unique opportunities for private higher education institutions. Today, science and technology are researched across the globe. But we as the APA and the ICP have something to offer that not many institutions in this country, and even globally, are able to meet. Many of them are doing research but not many institutions do it on a Christian foundation. In fact, many South African state universities decided to abandon their Christian foundation, and some even decided to remove the word "Christian" from their registered name, to be available to a larger portion of the South African demography.

We, as a private higher education institution, have the opportunity, according to our fundamental Christian foundation, to give a Christian perspective on social and religious questions of our time. By doing this, we not only take our knowledge to research and thus contribute to being research active, but our research should also be very relevant – thus contributing towards "successful research". It is a known fact, that if you speak words of wisdom, you speak to the mind of a person, but if you speak words of love and compassion, you speak to the heart of a person. If this kind of research in human sciences is not relevant, most research in the fields of Theology, Psychology, Christian Therapy and Human Philosophy should then be considered irrelevant as well.

I would like to point out only one example of how a Christian perspective on a known studied fact, can indeed bring a new perspective to that specific field of study. By pointing at this example, I would like to stress that within the academic fields of human sciences and theology, we will be able to point to countless similar instances, where a fresh Christian perspective on a known academic thesis, can indeed be very relevant, because not many researchers choose to take the Christian perspective in consideration when formulating research questions.

Consequently, I point to this example: we all know that man is supposed to be a custodian of the earth and its resources. In Genesis 1:28, after God created man in His image, we read: *God blessed them and said to them, (quote)“Be fruitful and increase in number; fill the earth and subdue it. Rule over the fish of the sea and the birds of the air and over every living creature that moves on the ground.”(unquote)*. It’s no secret that man didn’t do that good of a job in ruling over the earth. Some scholars⁴ even argue that we’re in an ecology crisis today, with global warming, pollution, flash floods, tsunamis, possible nuclear disasters, poverty and diseases household names. Many scientists are working relentlessly to try and solve the Johannesburg water problem, and millions of research money has been allocated to try and combat global warming. How about a Christian perspective on these crises? How about Christian institutions, like the APA and the ICP, taking many governments, many politicians, many big companies focused on huge profits, many mines who disregard custodianship and people’s health and focus on money, and many secular scientists back to the basics. The answers to these burning questions are Christian answers. The answer is: “take what you need and leave the rest for the next generation, don’t take what you don’t need”. That is basics that people tend to forget. In our research efforts as private higher

⁴ See for example the following:

Smit, GDS. 2004. *Mens en natuur. ‘n Bronnestudie na die Bybelse en na-Bybelse perspektiewe*. MA-thesis in the Department of Ancient Languages. University of Pretoria;

Barr, J. 1972. *Man and nature – Ecological controversy and the Old Testament*. Bulletin of the John Rylands University Library: Vol 55. University of Manchester.

Deane-Drummond, C. 1996. *A Handbook in Theology and Ecology*, London, SCM Press.

White, L, 1967. *The religious roots of our ecological crisis*. Science 155.

education institutions, these kind of questions should be our primary focus: to make a difference in people's understanding and handling of known debates.

This is but one example of the thousands of questions the ICP and the APA can help answer from a uniquely Christian perspective. In doing so, I propose that we will be conducting successful research, because we will be answering the basic question pertaining to research activities at higher education institutions, namely "so what"? This kind of research outputs strikes at the heart of the problem and thus it is very relevant.

A call to graduandi of the ICP to become research active and research involved

I proposed that private higher education institutions, like the Afrikaans Protestantse Akademie and the Institute of Christian Psychology can do more to stimulate research possibilities among students and lecturers by keeping an eye open for unanswered socio-economic, psychological and religious questions. By answering these problems from a Christian perspective, we will be conducting research in a way many state universities abandoned. These research outputs will therefore not only be unique, but will be relevant, because it speaks to the hearts of our communities.

We obviously don't have the funds to do research for the sake of research. So, if you decide on the topic of a research paper, or for those of you furthering your studies, if you should decide on the thesis of a Masters- or Doctoral study, ask the "so what" question very carefully. Keep asking yourself: "What can I do with my acquired knowledge to help answer questions relevant to our time?" We don't have a lack of research today, but we do have a lack of successful, that is relevant, research.

Do what you can do to involve yourself in ongoing research. If you decide to further your studies at another institution be an ambassador for the private higher education institutions, specifically for the ICP.

What I propose to you today is that you as graduate students of the ICP should get involved in research projects in your community, your institution, or even in the private sector. You can do that if you don't stop your studies today, but further your studies relentlessly. And by not cutting ties with the ICP today, but rather giving your acquired knowledge back to your

alma mater in due course, you can make a huge contribution towards research activity at private higher education institutions in South Africa.