

Improving the collection of data on Social Science and Humanities. Experiences from the South

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The collection of data on Social Science and Humanities (SSH) research remains a contested area. Contributions to the World Social Science Report 2010 have discussed these difficulties, and work to resolve them continues in international and national agencies such as the OECD, European Science Foundation and the US National Science Foundation.

The paper highlights difficulties of three types: (1) incompatibilities and lack of articulation of databases maintained by different agencies at regional, national and international levels; (2) specific difficulties related to discipline boundaries, sector definitions, measurement of headcounts and full-time equivalents and the outputs of SSH research, namely production of doctoral students and scientific literature; (3) understanding the employability, occupations and sectoral distribution of SSH masters and doctoral degree holders.

The authors draw on the SSH research information systems of South Africa and Brazil to illustrate the potentialities and difficulties of measurement, estimation, and accessibility. In both countries, indeed for most countries of the South, the main site of SSH research is in higher education, while the systematization and dissemination of its capacities and results resides elsewhere, usually in government agencies.

In South Africa the collection and management of S&T data whilst a 'national competence' is scattered, inconsistent and frequently inaccessible. Existing databases have been developed for specific organizational rather than system-wide reasons.

On the other hand, in Brazil considerable efforts were made to improve the databases of S&T inputs and outputs at federal agencies (CNPq and CAPES), but weaknesses remain especially regarding mobility and labour market supply and demand.

It is suggested these problems are common to many countries and that the specification of a minimum standard data set stipulated by an international body such as CODATA would significantly contribute to data completeness and harmonization.