

Rethinking research impact by Theology and Religious Studies with references to the Faculty of Theology at the University of Pretoria

Johan Buitendag^{ORCID}

Faculty of Theology
Department of Dogmatics and Christian Ethics
University of Pretoria
South Africa

Corneliu C. Simut^{ORCID}

Faculty of Theology
Department of Dogmatics and Christian Ethics
University of Pretoria
South Africa

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■ Introduction

In a recent article of mine, I argued that the 21st century has opened up a new niche for theology at a public university (Buitendag 2016). In my view, theology is a scholarly endeavour by believers in the public sphere in order to come to grips with multidimensional realities in a manner that matters.¹ I followed the definition of the Durban Declaration of a university, '[u]niversities are places of debate and contestation which provide space for new knowledge to be created, intellectual activity and freedom of thought'. (South Africa 2015). One has to distinguish among a seminary (in its different forms), Christians universities and lately, theological inquiry. Theological inquiry has a critical approach in its methodology. It implies contestation, interdisciplinary, multidisciplinary and even transdisciplinary research and wants to contribute to humans' search for understanding and meaning. It is not essentially ecclesiastical, perhaps not even ecumenical, but scientific in nature (Buitendag 2016):

The point at stake here is that a new grammar has been developed for theology as a science. The challenge for a Faculty of Theology at a research-intensive university is to publish where it is noted, that is Scopus, The Scientific Electronic Library Online (SciELO) SA and the Norwegian list, and of course the Thompson Reuters' Web of Science, previously referred to as the Institute for Scientific Information (ISI), and the International Bibliography of the Social Sciences (IBSS). The three most important indices measuring the world ranking position of universities are currently the Academic Ranking of World Universities (ARWU), The *Times Higher Education* (THE) and the *Quacquarelli Symonds* (QS), each with its own criteria. (p. 5)

1. 'There are those who will claim that the third mission of universities (i.e. providing services to the communities – broadly conceived to include industry – in which they are embedded) is, in fact, a core function of universities. The work of Etzkowitz and Leydsdorff and their concept of the 'triple helix' is often cited as providing a model in which research, teaching and service are inseparable. While third-mission activities in contemporary universities may well be commonplace and perhaps even inescapable, it is still both conceivable and possible for these activities to be performed by organisations external to the university' (Cloete, Bunting & Maassen 2015:211).

How does one measure the impact of theological research? The traditional Hirsch Index (H-impact factor) does not do justice to the social sciences at all as it is not calculated for journals within Arts and Humanities (AH).

UP is to embark on a new model for research funding. A draft document, 'Proposal on allocation of research subsidy budget to faculties', was tabled at a meeting of the Academic Planning Committee (University of Pretoria 2016). This policy is still being developed and is by no means official and not disclosed. The importance of this document from a social science perspective, however, is that the argument for research impact is based on natural science indices. The essence of the proposal is basically the following:

- The ISI and IBSS databases will be used to identify international journal publications.
- Articles which are published in very high impact journals will be rewarded more than others. This will include articles in science, nature and the top journal of a particular discipline.
- Articles in international journals, which fall into the top 10% per discipline (as defined by Scopus) will be rewarded more than articles in other international journals.
- Articles in conference proceedings will be rewarded less than other internationally published articles.
- Articles in SA journals with an Impact Factor (IF)² of less than 1 (even listed by ISI, Scopus and/or SciELO SA) should not be awarded a subsidy.
- International is interpreted as being non-South African. Books (or chapters of books) only qualify for the allocation if they are published internationally.

I will argue therefore in terms of the three categories mentioned (research productivity, citations and academic reputation) as

2. 'Proposed by Eugene Garfield in 1955, the Impact Factor (IF) started to be used as a tool for assessing the quality of publications in the sixties and later used as a criterion for selection of journals to be indexed by the Science Citation Index (SCI)'. http://www.scielo.br/scielo.php?pid=S0066-782X2011000200001&script=sci_arttext&tlng=en

listed in particular by QS. However, the point of this chapter is therefore to acknowledge a certain degree of differentiation of natural and social sciences, with special reference to theology, when the research footprint is to be measured. Both the QS and the THE magazine have decided to use the Scopus Index for the metrics. The IF is an indicator of the WoS, while Scopus uses a similar indicator, namely, the SCImago Journal Rank (SJR) (SCImago 2017). In concrete terms, the SJR ascribes scholarly journals to four quartiles and any journal which is included in the first quartile is considered to rank among the top 25% of the journals belonging to its specific field. Scopus works with different subject areas, which means that the values of the SJR are radically different among different sciences, very much like the IF at Thomson Reuters.³

This chapter should be regarded as the last of the series of three that I have authored in this regard. This particular chapter is based on my report submitted to the Executive, in response to the above-mentioned proposal tabled at the Academic Planning Committee in October 2016. My first article in this series appeared in 2014 (Buitendag 2014). Acknowledgement is hereby given to my co-author who has been the Editor-in-Chief of *Perichoresis: The Theological Journal of Emanuel University* since 2003, a thematic research journal included by the SJR in Q4 (289 out of 381) for the year 2015 and the only Romanian journal in the field of theology (not religious studies or philosophy) covered by WoS in Emerging Sources Citation Index (ESCI) (currently under review for inclusion in Arts and Humanities Citation Index [AHCI]). What I and the co-author inter alia have in common is our mutual battle against the perception that only First-World countries can predominantly produce quality research and that quality theology should be weighted by natural science instruments – as if ‘*ex Africa nunquam aliquid novi!*’

3. Thomson Reuters has recently sold the Web of Science to Clarivate Analytics (http://clarivate.com/scientific-and-academic-research/research-discovery/web-of-science/?_ga=1.234935873.1511600137.1486547578)

■ Reconsidering citations

There are three major instruments to measure citations:

JCR Impact factor⁴: ‘The impact factor is ... a measure of the frequency with which the average article in a journal has been cited in a particular year or period. The annual JCR impact factor is a ratio between citations and recent citable items published. Thus, the impact factor of a journal is calculated by dividing the number of current year citations to the source items published in that journal during the previous two years.’

SCImago Journal Rank⁵ (SJR indicator): ‘The SJR indicator is a measure of scientific influence of scholarly journals that accounts for both the number of citations received by a journal and the importance or prestige of the journals where such citations come from. The SJR indicator assigns different values to citations depending on the importance of the journals where they come from. This way, citations coming from highly important journals will be more valuable and hence will provide more prestige to the journals receiving them’.

The H-index⁶ (Hirsch index): ‘The H-index of a researcher is defined as the number of articles published by the researcher, whose citations are greater than or equal to that number. For example, when we say that the H-index of a researcher is ten, it means that he has [*they have*] at least 10 articles published, each with at least 10 citations. The greater the number of articles of great interest published by the researcher, the greater the number of citations achieved, and the greater his [*their*] H-index, reflecting the academic and scientific quality of the researcher and his [*their*] production capacity. However, only the total number of articles, for example, may hide the

4. <http://wokinfo.com/essays/impact-factor/>

5. https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/SCImago_Journal_Rank

6. http://www.scielo.br/scielo.php?pid=S0066-782X2011000200001&script=sci_arttext&tlng=en

lack of relevance of each text in isolation. We can thus say that the H-index is the result of the balance between the number of publications and the number of citations’.

The number of citations is a ranking indicator, which generally amounts to 20%–30% of the total score credited to the assessment of research outputs (Buitendag 2016:6). Thus, in concrete terms, the FT at the UP has been benchmarked for the past six years compared not only to similar theological faculties in SA, (Stellenbosch University, University of the Free State, and North-West University), but also with highly ranked international universities like those in Berlin, Edinburgh, and the Free University of Amsterdam.

Based on the bibliometric parameters supplied by WoS for the field of Religion, two aspects emerge as crucially important as well as poignantly valid for the redefinition of evaluation parameters not only in the general domain of AH but also in the specific fields of TRS. Thus, AH appear to be less dependent on specialised journals and more inclined to communicate scholarly productions by means of monographs/books as well as citations, both in and for the respective books. The exclusion of such paramount information from the assessment of research performance and its accompanying metrics is going to result in a severe under-representation of academic exchange in the field of AH, including TRS.

Secondly, citations in the broader domain of AH normally extend over a period ranging between two and five years, which are the standard time frames used by WoS for the calculation of the IF in Journal Citation Report (JCR). Invariably, this reflects as poor scores in Journal IFs in general, but also to extremely low scores for a 5-year IF. AH journals will score below par, even when a 10-year IF is used for the calculation of research performance metrics (Levitt et al. 2010:xi-xv).

Consequently, it is obvious that the number of publications exceeds the number of citations in the domain of AH, a common phenomenon that is also reflected in TRS. Inevitably, the IF does

not constitute a true or valid parameter for the assessment of scientific publications in AH. It is precisely because of the insufficiency, as well as the incapacity of the IF to adequately represent the quality of scientific research in AH that QS and THE magazine have recently taken the decision to make use of the Scopus Index for the purpose of redefining the metrics and criteria which assess the quality of research in scientific outputs throughout the realm of humanistic disciplines. To be sure, the IF is an indicator used by the WoS while a similar indicator called SJR has been employed by Scopus.

Citations, however, must be approached sensibly, not only from the perspective of their counted number, but also from the reality of the research field in which a certain scholar works. For instance, even in theoretical and natural sciences whose citation IF is much higher than that of AH, citations evolve at different rates: to give just one example, while in mathematics citations indicate a slow evolution, in biomedicine they evolve very fast (Tijssen 2015:65). Similarly, within the very domain of AH, TRS may develop a different evolution in terms of citation impact than History or Cultural Anthropology. Moreover, the same pattern exists even between Theology, on the one hand, and Religious Studies on the other. Currently, the phrase ‘theology and religious studies’ differentiates between Christianity, presupposed by ‘theology’, and other world religions, designated as ‘religious studies’. Often, too much emphasis is placed on the former which is automatically and traditionally considered superior or more deserving to be studied than the latter.

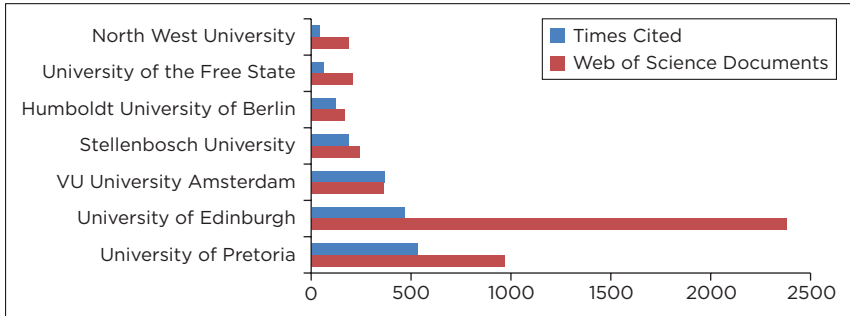
While this distinction is not always detrimental because some faculties may prefer to insist on Christian theology and not on world religions, both should constitute an institution of higher learning which aspires to be globally recognised as a genuine research university. A careful balance in this respect should be maintained and a merging of both as a single discipline which could be called religion or religious though could be investigated (Venter 2016:3-4).

In other words, a research university cannot afford not to be inclusive, if the same importance is not ascribed to all religions or cultures or societies. The conditions of objectivity and equal promotion in the academic field remain non-negotiable. This was exactly the motivation of the FT to change its name during the year of its Centenary to an inclusive 'Faculty of Theology and Religion'.

At the same time, one should never lose sight of the fact that the scientific world has a dynamic of its own and it is not always value or worth which prompt other scholars to read a certain article but often their subjective interests, their perspective on the country of origin of the author of that article, and other similar highly personal factors. For instance, in Africa, more than half of the continent's 'most highly cited researchers' have so far been written in cooperation with colleagues from outside Africa (Tijssen 2015:71), which indicates that internationalisation and not necessarily one's intellectual value is what encourages an article be more frequently cited by others. Moreover, citations do not necessarily imply quality; one has to keep in mind that it is possible to have theological and religious journals which publish high quality articles but are not as cited as often as others. This may happen because it is assumed that Western journals tend to be generally considered better or more qualitative than their Eastern counterparts; hence, the preference of researchers to access and cite more from journals published in the developed world.

It is significant to notice in this respect that the research of the UP has a powerful impact with a ratio between citations and publications of 55% while, by comparison, the University of Edinburgh has 20%, as shown by the graph (Figure 1).

Consequently, educational policies seeking to support the publication of scientific articles for example in journals with an IF bigger than 1, will most certainly be detrimental not only in AH, but also, and especially in TRS. No single journal of TRS appears on the WoS IF list and all articles would therefore be excluded by the formula $IF > 1$.



Source: Compiled by J. Buitendag.

FIGURE 1: International research footprint of benchmarking faculties of theology.

Coupled with the fact that in AH, vibrant academic communication is performed through books, not journals, it is more sensible to focus on assessment parameters which reflect the situation of the impact of academic products in AH in a more realistic way. This is why it seems to be more logical to move away from the IF system promoted by WoS and draw closer to the SJR produced by Scopus. As such, Religious Studies, which includes Theology, feature as a subcategory of the overarching AH in SJR with 381 journals listed as globally recognised for their scientific impact and only 95 journals included in the first quartile.⁷ Therefore, it can be argued rather convincingly that these journals are considered the best in the world in the field of Religious Studies and they do contribute, although moderately, to the metrics of both the QS and THE citation indices.

It should be noted that only one journal in this list of 95 titles has a SJR factor which is calculated to be higher than 1, namely *Psychology of Religion and Spirituality* with an IF of 1.059. The remaining journals in the first quartile focusing on Religious Studies have IFs lower than 1, with the lowest of 0.157 for *The Jewish Quarterly Review* which ends the first quartile list. When it comes

7. <http://scimagojr.com/journalrank.php?category=1212&area=1200&type=j>

to the specific situation of SA, four journals make it into the first quartile: *HTS Theological Studies/Teologiese Studies* (0.236), *Neotestamentica* (0.212), *Acta Theologica* (0.197), and *Verbum et Ecclesia* (0.164).⁸

In light of this categorisation, it is evident that the WoS becomes rather inadequate as assessment criterion for scientific and humanistic journals. Educational policies attempting to prevent subsidies for articles with a factor lower than 1 do not take into account the points mentioned above. This is why the proposal to confine 'international journal publications' to WoS and IBSS databases' is in urgent need of serious revision.

I wish to make the following proposal to do justice to the principle of international benchmarking and quality research impact. To begin with, as far as TRS are concerned, the IF provided by WoS should be replaced by the score calculated by SJR, with a value higher than 0, so the proposed WoS IF>1 should be replaced by SJR>0 (Scopus, Elsevier), meaning, it has to appear in the SJR list with its four quartiles.

At the same time, the very definition of the adjective 'international' requires an equally substantial reconceptualisation. As such, South African journals listed in Scopus, some of which are also included in ISI/IBSS, should no longer be seen as local, but rather as international, since their contribution to scientific research is recognised by their inclusion in reputed international databases like Scopus. Hence the phrase 'international journals' should be interpreted as research based on international databases such as Scopus, WoS and Open Access Publishing in European Networks (OAPEN).⁹ When these

8. <http://www.scimagojr.com/journalrank.php?category=1212&area=1200&count=1&type=j&year=2015>

9. Journals in the Emerging Sources Citation Index (ESCI) have passed an initial editorial evaluation and can continue to be considered for inclusion in products such as Science Citation Index Expanded (SCIE), Social Sciences Citation Index (SSCI), and AHCI. All ESCI journals will be indexed according to the same data standards, including cover-to-cover indexing, cited reference indexing, subject

are South African journals, they will have to be published in English so that their international impact can be maximised and measured. In the very specific case of the UP, its radical transformation from a national to an international institution of higher learning is 'in part' the result of 'publishing in non-Afrikaans journals' (Makholwa 2014:21). This is extremely important because it appears that articles in English make the greatest impact due to their availability in the lingua franca of the 21st century, as demonstrated by the 97% of articles produced by African researchers between 2007 and 2011 (Pouris & Ho 2014:2172), which is a critical move towards rebranding research throughout the continent.

It should be stressed here that the very notion of impact is at stake in AH, and especially in TRS. It is problematic to ensure that what is termed 'research impact' is correctly ascribed to scholars and researchers in every field, as well as for TRS. It is equally difficult, if not impossible, to predict the impact that research works will have in the future; at the same time, there is no certainty in evaluating the research impact of academic works before being published. Based on these considerations and similar concerns (such as the fact that the research impact cannot always be convincingly attributed to a certain person or group of persons and that the same research impact cannot be based on the time frame between the actual publication of a certain research output and the first perceived evidence of the research impact), it may be necessary, helpful but also responsible and logical, to replace the idea of 'impact' with the notion of 'value' (Levitt et al. 2010:xiii). The problem of evaluating research outputs, however, does not vanish into thin air: the extremely difficult issue of finding a way to quantify, measure, and calculate the impact or value of scholarly work remains and must be legislated in some way for the sake of building a system of academic accountability.

(footnote 9 continues ...)

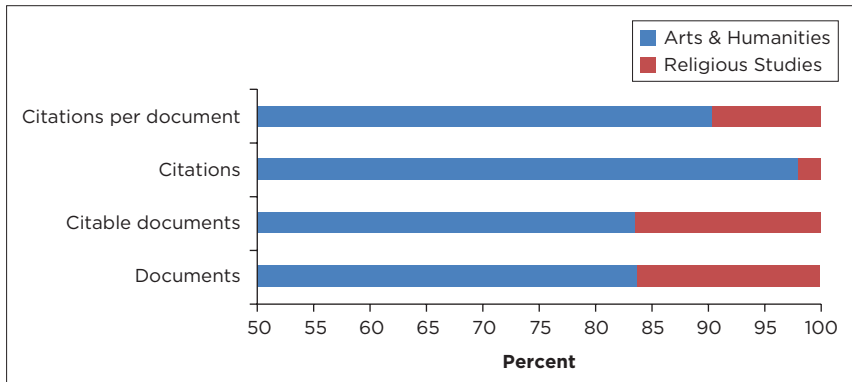
category assignment, and indexing all authors and addresses. (Excerpt from the *Web of Science Core Collection - Emerging Sources Citation Index* by Thomson Reuters Flyer).

■ Redefining productivity

In TRS, it is often the case that scientific productions, books and articles, are not always correctly evaluated from the standpoint of their importance for the field they serve. In other words, the number of research outputs is not always correctly matched with the impact they produce in the fields of TRS throughout the world. To take just one example, the members of the FT at the UP have constantly been exceedingly productive in terms of research outputs such as books and articles, to the point that the annual number of doctoral graduates (30 in 2015) became almost equal to the number of C1 staff, which is a remarkable achievement. As it happens, the FT is by far the smallest faculty within the UP (1.4% of students and 1.5% of lecturers) and it still produces approximately 12% of the article output and 9% of the weighted research output of the entire university.

It is crucial to understand that while TRS are not considered independent research fields by any indexing agency, they function as subcategories of the domain of AH and thus contribute, albeit indirectly, to the particular case of the UP. The aim is to firmly establish the position of the Faculty of Humanities, even if the FT is an independent organisational body. This situation is not unique throughout SA, so it is not unfair to affirm that TRS contributes solidly to the development of AH. It is thus clear that as a ranking indicator, productivity needs to be redefined, since the research of Faculties of Theology contribute not only to the establishment of their own field, but also to the reputation of adjacent domains throughout the spectrum of AH, as it amounts to 30% of the total score ascribed to the assessment of research outputs (Figure 2).

Since by virtue of the inclusion of TRS in the field of AH by all indexing agencies, the FT in SA are indirect contributors to the development of the faculties of AH, despite their independence from each other. It is important to acknowledge the FT by recognising their international contribution in terms of academic productivity. For instance, there is currently an uneasiness about



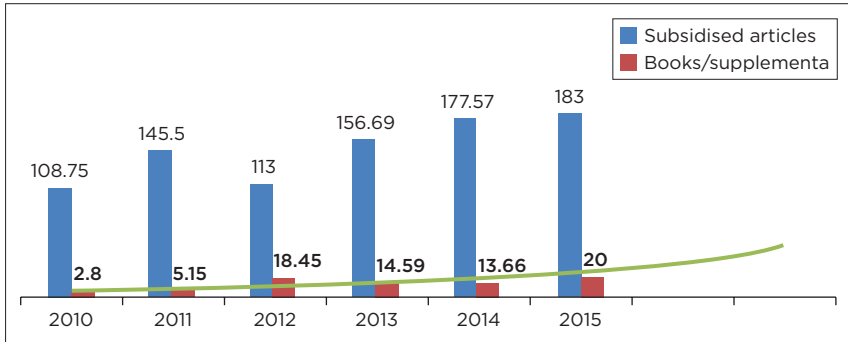
Source: Compiled from <http://scimagojr.com/journalrank.php?area=1200&country=Africa&year=2015>.

FIGURE 2: Contribution of Religious Studies to Arts & Humanities in South Africa.

the adequate definition of ‘international’ as applied to books and book chapters ‘published internationally’.

In AH, most academic conversations are based on monographs and books, and the Book Citation Index is a crucial indexing instrument for TRS at the same level with AHCI, so what the latter is for journals the former is for books. Given that the publication of books has recently become more significant for world rankings and also for subsidy purposes by the Department of Higher Education and Training (DHET) (with 10 units earned for a publication exceeding 300 pages), the FT at the UP has significantly increased its efforts to publish books for the past three years, as seen in Figure 3.

Having established the crucial contribution of books to the development of scientific research in TRS, it is vital that the adjective ‘international’ be applied not only to books and book chapters published outside SA, but also to those published in SA provided they are published in the Open Access system and listed in reputed international databases like Scopus, WoS, and OAPEN. Thus, ‘books and chapters published internationally’ should not be interpreted as exclusively ‘non-South African’ but



Source: Buitendag (2016b:4).

FIGURE 3: Faculty of Theology publications over five years: Articles versus books.

as inclusively South African if they are covered by the above-mentioned indexing agencies.¹⁰

When such goals are achieved, one must not lose sight of research incentives. As such, it is important to establish a fair compensation by means of such incentives with particular reference to every scholar. Current subvention fees for articles in accredited journals range from R5 000 to R15 000 in SA and in the case of the FT at the UP, have to be paid by the author. Some way of compensation has to be found. If not, it is inevitable that negative consequences will result. For instance, academics appointed by the UP in the FT, receive the lowest incentive rates as compared to the four benchmarking South African faculties of theology. If this situation is not remedied, losing associates, fellows and members of the staff will become an unfortunate reality, which may also result in a lack of motivation to publish productively.

This is why research productivity must be re-evaluated and redefined so that it may eventually, be adequately quantified and

10. The National Research Foundation expects that all book publications should be open access within 12 months after publication (<http://www.nrf.ac.za/media-room/news/statement-open-access-research-publications-national-research-foundation-nrf-funded>).

properly rewarded. Before quantification and reward, however, the very concept of operationalisation must aim at turning research productivity into something that functions well within universities. Thus, in order for research productivity to increase, universities will have to focus on stimulating individual incentives (self-determination, fulfilment and confidence), institutional factors (financial incentives and infrastructure), carefully designed and implemented funding policies (identification of donors and international cooperation), and the careful determination to instil a realistic research culture (management philosophy, behaviour regulations and leadership focus). Without these policies, research productivity is most unlikely to increase or at least be maintained at a steady level. Universities will be trapped into a never-ending cycle of attempts characterised by 'struggling to improve ... academic research productivity' (Musiige & Maasen 2015:113–115, 110).

At the same time, and this is a serious caveat, productivity and reward must be balanced without losing sight of the fact that when productivity is measured by various ranking indicators originating from exact sciences, not only the very essence of TRS can become superfluous but also with the inevitable consequence of the diminishing role of applied theology. The idea of excellence will be 'reduced to statistical accountancy' (Mbembe 2016:4). Productivity is not the most important aspect of scientific research and neither is reward; yet, an exclusive focus on productivity and reward will inevitably lead to false comparisons between local and somewhat exotic institutions of higher education and very old and competitive universities (Mbembe 2016:5) which in turn will nullify the special character of the former while missing the effectiveness of the latter both in terms of productivity and incentives. Important as it may be, incentives must be devised cleverly because while it seems at first that only academic rewards are effective to boost the morale of scholars, it may be the case that non-academic incentives can prove to be at least as effective, provided researchers are given due credit for their work in the academy (Levitt et al. 2010:xv).

Since it appears that there is a direct connection between the scholars' morale and their research productivity (Wangenge-Ouma, Lutomiah & Langa 2015:130), there is little doubt that 'academic and research performance' must be connected to 'progression in academic careers' (Wangenge-Ouma et al. 2015:134). In other words, anyone who is productive in the academic field must be promoted so that the scholar themselves will be capable of perceiving some concrete results of their academic efforts. Thus, universities must constantly find ways to offer promotion opportunities with clear advancement methodologies from lower to higher academic ranks, financial allowances for academic work like supervision and publications, as well as recognition of supervision and publications provided they are both perceived and evaluated as successful (Wangenge-Ouma et al. 2015:138-140). A key aspect of the fine-tuning of incentives for the real increase of research productivity is to strike a balance between the time allocated to research and reasonable teaching loads which are often very heavy and burdensome, to the evident detriment of research productivity (Wangenge-Ouma et al. 2015:141).

With this in mind, productivity and incentives are important for university life because research outputs must be produced, disseminated, and validated somehow – this is, after all, the very life of universities. The balance between the two, however, must be kept in favour of those who are productive and fit for the deserved reward, irrespective of any aspects which pertain to their being other than their mind – the only real currency in universities. In offering rewards for productivity, discrimination of any sort, such as apartheid policies, must be avoided, discouraged, and – if possible – eliminated in favour of one's intellectual achievements. Evidently, moving beyond apartheid is a bold but necessary decolonisation measure which must imply that all people, irrespective of their particularities and country of origin, must be given equal chances to perform in the realm of scientific inquiry and subsequently be rewarded correctly in a globalised world which will neither avoid SA nor destroy its national attachment (Clark 2007:305). Thus, rewarding scholarly productivity must never be guided by tolerance, which only

increases intolerance, but only by fair, proper, and hopefully commensurate recognition of one's research products and their inherent quality, not by any kind of discriminatory aspects such as race, sex, or age (Njovane 2015:116–129).

While incentives must be fairly distributed so that all scholars are encouraged to produce research outputs, it is important to realise that senior scholars have the chance to produce works which have a higher impact. Factors such as the higher academic status and the wider range of opportunities present are more likely to favour senior and established scholars more than their younger and less experienced colleagues. It is often a fact that it is much more difficult for junior scholars to publish and then disseminate the results of their work through various conferences and workshops than it is for their senior colleagues who are much more famous in their fields (Levitt et al. 2010:xiv). This is why it is important to reassess productivity as well as the reality of academic reputations. A re-examination of these two factors as promotion criteria is long overdue.

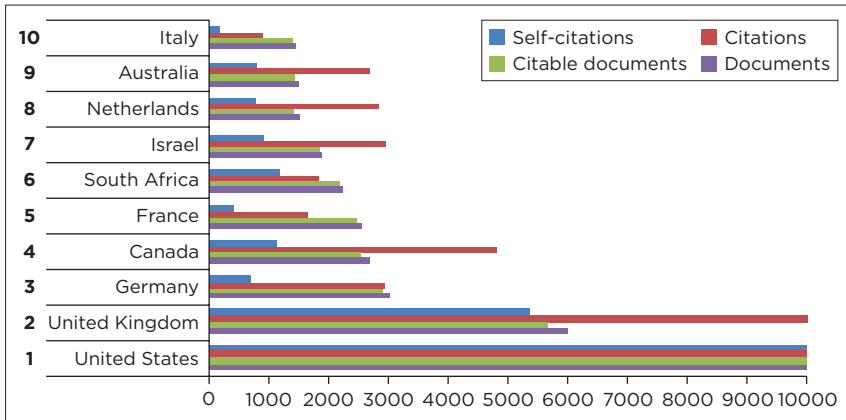
■ Rebranding reputation

The third ranking indicator in need of reassessment is reputation, which in fact derives from research impact and research productivity. Although notoriously difficult to measure, reputation appears to rise up to 40% of the total score ascribed to the assessment of research outputs, which turns it into the most important ranking indicator considered in light of scientific scoring. When applied to the particular case of the FT at the UP reputation is one of the defining criteria of the institution, which is not only renowned for its scientific excellence, but also its high esteem continentally and globally.

Set against the SJR regarding Religious Studies as subcategory of AH, South African universities hold the sixth position in the world. When included in the wider category of AH, the field of Religious Studies places SA 10 positions lower, namely dropping

to position number 16 in the world; it must be highlighted once again, that this happens when Religious Studies are judged from the perspective of their contribution to the development of the more encompassing category of AH.¹¹ The graph in Figure 4 is self-explanatory as it provides obvious evidence in favour of the global position of South African Religious Studies (no. 6) when considered separately from AH, but also the much lower position (no. 16) when placed within AH also within SA.

It is not unusual to understand why South African Religious Studies have such a powerful impact not only in SA, but also in Africa as a continent and then all over the world. As Paul Gifford indicates in his authoritative study entitled *African Christianity: Its public role*, the strongest institution south of the Sahara is the church. To be more precise, the most influential social reality which shapes human life in Sub-Saharan Africa is Christianity with its entire Sub-Saharan of confessional churches. This is indicative



Source: Compiled from <http://scimagojr.com/countryrank.php?area=1200&category=1212>.

FIGURE 4: International position of South Africa in the field of Religious Studies.

11. <http://scimagojr.com/countryrank.php?area=1200>

of the fact that no other organisation in Africa has dominance throughout the continent in the sense that it is indeed the best institution, both religiously and secularly, to interact with poor and disadvantaged people (Mamphela Ramphele). Such fringe activities naturally emanate from the church and its members, so it can be argued that if exceptional work leads to social reputation, it is only logical for universities to profit in a positive way, through the activities of the various faculties of theology. The equation is very simple: the church helps the poor, the church acquires a reputation and influence. The church collaborates with faculties of theology, the faculties of theology benefit from the reputation and influence of churches, and finally this reputation and influence placed upon the faculties of theology can be reflected positively and in numerous ways on the universities which host them. Why? Because while the work of the church reflects positively on the university, the reputation of the university is likely to increase because of the church without a heavy dependence or reliance on the church (Olson 2005:116). In other words, the university does not have to rely on the church; it only has to work with the church.

This is extremely important because, as noted before, not all scholars find it easy to make their research known throughout the academy. While more senior scholars have already built a reputation of their own and are consequently known and appreciated in their fields, the same cannot be said of junior scholars for whom going up in their field of expertise may prove much more difficult. This is why, junior researchers – and senior researchers too – should try to step beyond the academic field into society and find new ways to disseminate their research through any means which popularise science, for the sake of everybody, and especially of those less fortunate. For instance, they should no longer focus exclusively on conversing with experts in their fields but rather attempt to step beyond the narrow field of their expertise to connect with common people by means of popular magazines, newspapers, public lectures, and even popular books. All these aspects will certainly contribute not only to making

certain researchers known in society but also to strengthening the reputation of their faculties and universities (Levitt et al. 2010:xiv).

Establishing a solid reputation means confirmation of 'competitiveness on the international stage' (Cloete et al. 2015:20). Attaining a high level of international competitiveness is never easy and in order for this to be achieved, institutions of higher learning must turn into research universities. It is absolutely vital to understand at this point that reputation may mean different things in different countries, and even internationally. While in industrialised countries, academic reputation is established by being highly competitive and consequently published in top research journals, developing countries with slow growth economies and lower per capita income, scholarly reputation may mean getting involved in the advancement of local and national academic systems (Cloete et al. 2015:20). Reputation is first established nationally and only then internationally, although exceptional international achievements will undoubtedly increase local and national reputation as well.

Going back to the particular case of the FT at the UP, its social impact was noticed not only by the leaders of various churches in the country but also by society as a whole. In concrete terms, doctorates have been conferred by the UP on four current bishops of the Anglican Church of Southern Africa and the four partner churches of the FT elected their moderators from the faculty's academic staff members. This is compelling proof that the FT at the UP is not only thriving academically in terms of research indexing and academic productivity, but is also constantly growing in reputation both in SA and beyond.

As the work of the church is unceasingly informed as well as supported, in SA, by the teaching and research activities of the FT within the UP, it goes without saying that the FT is reflected in the work of the church. Thus, the reputation which the FT enjoys in society, also as a result of what the church does in helping the poor and the disadvantaged, reflects itself positively on the UP as institutional host for the academic

field of TRS which, despite the huge advances of sciences these days, remains a critical field for the development of social justice and human rights. People today may not be interested in explaining the existence of God, but they are surely interested in explaining belief or faith in God and how this becomes relevant in our secularised context; it is in fact explanations like these which promoted, develop, and defend not only social justice but also human rights so that the fabric of society remains intact (Balcomb 2012:9–10).

At the same time, given the exceptional performance of the FT with regard to scientific research as evaluated and based on scientific citations, research productivity, and academic reputation, all established nationally and internationally, it is clearly safe to say that the UP deserves to profit, substantially and steadily, from the scientific work of its FT. Lastly, but certainly not the least important, the UP has the opportunity to benefit from the reputation which its FT earned ecclesiastically, socially, and academically to strengthen its own global reputation among similar highly ranked institutions in the world. In order to do this, however, the need to produce as well as appoint a 'competent labour force' and 'highly skilled' professionals (Cloete et al. 2015:29) is more stringent than ever because academic progress and research advancement cannot be achieved unless scholars are recognised as globally competitive through the academic validation of their research outputs. Since competence transcends nationalities and nations, if the UP wants to increase its influence by raising its research impact, it is evident that policies must be enforced in favour of appointing competent researchers not only from the native South Africans, but also from abroad so that a comfortable balance should exist between equity and quality (Govinder, Zando & Makgoba 2013:5–7). In a globalised world, multiculturalism is not only a reality but also the very force behind the production of exceptional research outputs because appointing people from abroad is very likely to contribute to the consolidation of a vigorous national identity both socially and academically (Clark 2007:315).

■ Reimagining progress

Going forward is never easy and it is even less so for universities in a globalised world. However, if moving on is facilitated not only by obtaining better results, but also by obtaining better outcomes, the policies behind such facilitation are already a huge step forward. In other words, if universities could find a way to give credit for, assess and validate output within a meaningful framework, or within its own immediate context, progress has will have been established. When applied to TRS, this golden rule presupposes the evaluation of theological and religious work by means of instruments which are case specific for theology and religion, not for other disciplines. Concretely, TRS cannot be given value or added extra credit by being measured through the metrics provided by the WoS IF, on the contrary, in order for TRS to be correctly and meaningfully evaluated, such measurements must be done by means of SJR, which incorporates the criteria to validate the inner reality of AH as well as that of TRS.

Since the IF from WoS functions better for natural and social sciences, but less well for AH, it is irrational to apply metrics specific to exact sciences to disciplines which are not scientific. The way forward for TRS is to be fairly judged against criteria of performance which are sensible for the field of TRS, and at most for AH, but not for other sciences. And if progress is associated with meaningfulness, then the scientific evaluation of academic outputs in TRS must be done through ranking indicators which must not only be adapted to measure the scientific life of TRS, but also to confer meaning upon the work of theologians and religious scholars through a rightful and just evaluation.

At the same time, fair compensation must be awarded to theologians and religious scholars who publish in significant journals which are covered by various databases of scientific repute throughout the world. A possible way forward towards the financial compensation of researchers is to decrease the amount of money given to articles which make it into the DHET, to maintain the same value, differentiated though from smaller

to bigger amounts, for articles published in journals covered by SciELO SA, Scopus, and the first quartile of JSR, and to increase the funds for the journals published in journals indexed in the top 10% of the journals listed in JSR.

The differentiation in funding should be applied to all three ranking indicators evaluated so far, namely citations, productivity, and reputation, provided each is reconsidered, redefined, and rebranded in such a way that not only individual researchers are compensated meaningfully for their hard work, but also so that the whole field of TRS is advanced and constantly supported through policies focused on reimagining and the defining of academic advancement.

This model can be implemented fairly easily. In particular, the faculties of TRS should focus on producing articles which will be published in the journals which are listed in the top 10% of their discipline as included in SJR provided by Scopus. As of 2017, 381 journals are listed in the subcategory of religious studies, while 95 of them are included in the first quartile. There are currently seven traditional disciplines in TRS, namely NTS, OTS, Systematic and Historical Studies, Science of Religion and Missiology, PT, Religion Studies, and Multidisciplinary Approaches. In any theological faculty, the heads of departments should be asked to identify the top seven journals in their respective fields of academic research, all included up to date in the first quartile including journals which transcend specific disciplines into broader domains of scientific inquiry.

It is, therefore, absolutely necessary to implement a responsible methodology for the accurate and meaningful evaluation of the scholarly impact of all works pertaining to the fields of TRS. Such a methodology, characterised by sensitivity, fairness and responsibility towards the personal and collective effort by scholars of their published works, must always have as its prime aim to advance and progress the Faculty of TRS and by consequence, the reputation of the hosting university. The very first step towards the establishment of scientific

progress in the fields of TRS consists of reconsidering citations, redefining productivity, rebranding reputation, and reimagining advancement through the active implementation of two simple and clear policies. Firstly, the formula $IF > 1$, that refers to articles published in journals for which WoS calculates an IF bigger than 1, must be changed in the sense that it must be replaced by the formula $SJR > 0$, pertaining to articles published in journals for which SJR calculates an IF bigger than 0. Secondly, it is crucially important that the very definition of the concept 'international' should be adapted to cover databases like Scopus, WoS, and OAPEN (perhaps ERIH as well¹²) even if they include, in the specific case of SA, journals published in SA. For the sake of clarity, South African journals which are listed in the international databases, Scopus, WoS, and OAPEN and even the European Reference Index for the Humanities and the Social Sciences (ERIH PLUS) should no longer be considered local, but fully-fledged international because their inclusion in these databases is not only a recognition of their scientific value, but also a confirmation of their scholarly impact at international level in the academic field. The implementation of such academic policies will not only ensure the proper evaluation, credit and compensation for the work of individual academics, but also that the prestige of faculties of TRS, as well as that of their hosting universities, is adequately established scientifically, socially, and culturally.

Nevertheless, when science, society, and culture blend together in a reality which seeks to produce knowledge, advancement, and progress, it is advisable to realise that research ranking is a Western product. The fact that it is Western is not automatically bad; it is however a reason for concern regarding how African universities attempt to rebrand themselves in a globalised world where AH seems to lose their appeal (Abdullah 2011:18). The hegemony of the West in scholarly research is a fact, whether or not it is the result of the fact that African universities want

12. https://dbh.nsd.uib.no/publiseringskanaler/erihplus/about/criteria_for_inclusion

to imitate or emulate their Western counterparts. Western as it is, research and university ranking is a tool which may prove useful when dealing with the reality of the necessity to quantify the value and impact of scholarly products and if it is good, then African universities should make use of it. Deciding how or which ranking system should be used for certain fields of academic inquiry is where serious discernment should prevail. At the same time, seeing how these evaluations are useful to society as a whole, is another issue which requires close and careful examination. Coming to grips with such complex realities requires not only academic work, but also solidarity and cooperation, both national and international (Abdullah 2011:18-19) so that adequate measures are devised and implemented for the successful promotion of scientific research even in fields of inquiry which are more difficult to evaluate, like AH or TRS.

This is why in 2010 the RAND Corporation published a survey which revealed that AH, and by implication TRS, are neither dying as academic disciplines or fields of scholarly inquiry, nor are they succumbing to the exact and natural sciences. In fact, the survey clearly indicated that both the University of Cambridge and the Arts and Humanities Research Council, which both ordered the study, were most interested in the situation of AH not only in tertiary education contexts but also in the non-academic background of contemporary society. In fact, both institutions were actively involved in finding ways to do the following:

- Evaluate the impact of AH.
- Devise mechanisms to fund AH.
- Develop better ways to understand, describe and assess research impact in AH.
- Seek to put together an adequate methodology for the proper evaluation of the research impact of AH.

These four aspects reveal that there is an active interest not only in the field of AH, but also in how these impacts on society as a whole. Better ways to evaluate this impact need to be developed. AH impact on society and it is because of this

awareness and its contribution to research, that AH should be evaluated as fairly and correctly as possible. The most striking aspect which results from this study is the urgent need to find new methods to assess the research impact of AH. There are more ways than one to evaluate the impact of AH. It is highly possible that more than one way exists and can coexist. AH are so complex and difficult to evaluate that one must be open to multiple possibilities which can all be valid even in different settings (Levitt et al. 2010:xi-xii).

This complexity also points to the fact that the very notion of impact is problematic, primarily because AH have 'many impacts' both within and beyond universities, in the publishing industry, professional practice, mass media, and cultural life. Consequently, the research impact in AH is not only difficult to measure accurately, but also extremely hard to predict. Such realisation leads to another problematic aspect, namely that young researchers need an extensive period of time for research which will consequently represent lower impacts while their senior colleagues will most probably score higher points on this assessment criteria.

At the same time, given their specificity, AH are more likely than exact and natural sciences to produce 'public knowledge creation'. This is problematic in calculating their real research impact, because this impact is often unplanned and often impossible to evaluate. Despite these acknowledged difficulties, it is clear that AH (TRS included) continue to effect a considerable influence in the academic field and in most common strata of society. To evaluate this influence, it is imperative that assessment criteria be adjusted responsibly, in order to take into account these variants from other academic disciplines (Levitt et al. 2010:xiv-xv).

It is certainly very clear that even in the favourable outcome that such policies are accepted and then duly implemented, the ever present issue of finances comes into question. Is it feasible that the promotion of TRS by means of the proper recognition of scientific works pertaining to these fields be sustained in the

long run and if so, is it possible to find the adequate financial means to insure such progress?

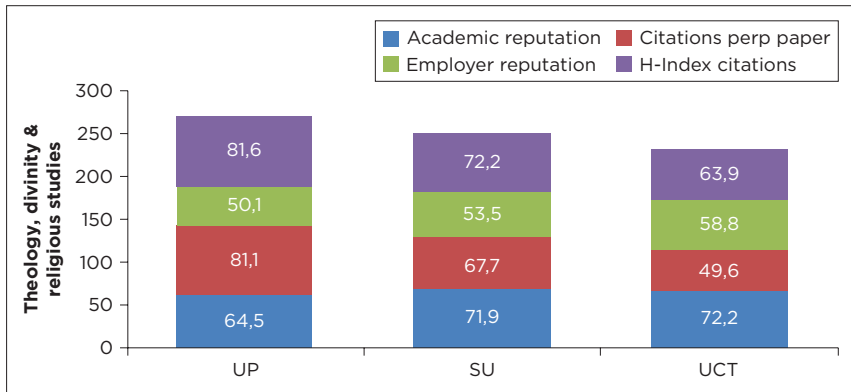
While the question is certainly obvious, so is the positive answer which accompanies it and can be found in the so-called 'triple-helix' formula focusing on the rather complex web of relationships between university, industry, and government (see Cloete et al. 2015:211). In other words, universities must find ways to cooperate with various industries and government institutions for the proper evaluation and fair compensation of the scientific work of their scholars even to the point that not only natural and social sciences are favoured, primarily because their results are more easily absorbed into society to generate income, but also because humanities and especially TRS are envisioned as partners in promoting success, advancing progress, and improving life. For such a vision to take shape, one needs to consider the so-called '(neo-) institutional perspective' on the relationships between university, industry, and government, according to which the university works in partnership with the industry and government in order to find new visions into innovation, so that mutually beneficial relationships are mutually profitable. Universities should not only be dependent on the government or the industry (the statist configuration), neither should they be left to manage on their own either (the laissez-faire configuration). On the contrary, universities must be included in a system which functions in such a way that the results of scholarly work (scientific, social, cultural, financial etc.) are enjoyed by the university, industry, and government alike (the balanced configuration) (Ranga & Etzkowitz 2013). Evidently, in the real world, universities cannot function without finances, so the debt-free college model based on tuition free initiatives are headed for disaster while the state funded college model anchored in full government support may lead to shortcomings in teaching and research (Sweetland Edwards 2016:76-77).

This is why having the necessary financial means to run a university from various sources like students and/or university,

industry, and government appears to be a policy of common sense – not only because it makes mutual interdependency a cause for serious accountability, but also because it may work as an incentive for each and all the institutions involved in financing education and hence further development.

Should such policies be adopted, the relationship between universities, industries, and government will be considered from the so-called '(neo-) evolutionary perspective because these three entities will inevitably 'coevolve' into 'subsets of social systems'. In other words, universities, industries, and government will develop together into self-sustaining systems which will automatically inform as well as influence society as a whole. When this happens, these interactions between universities, industries, and government will be able to be measured by specific indicators which will give concrete shape to the cooperation between scholars, managers, and policy makers. Provided this model functions well, universities will become, quite naturally, entrepreneurial because they will have to constantly seek new ways of interaction with the industry and the government so that their work is not only properly rewarded financially, but also transposed meaningfully into the wider web of social existence for the active and unceasing promotion of the common good. When applied to TRS, people training in these fields must be aware, sympathetic, and respectful of other religions so that by means of such understanding, society is going to constantly move forward in a never-ending pursuit of knowledge and progress (Hinnells 2004:127-128).

The QS World University Rankings by Subject 2017 released on 08 March 2017 their latest metrics and rankings in a new category of 'Theology, Divinity & Religious Studies' (QS WUR 2017). The FT at Pretoria (and so Stellenbosch and Cape Town) has been ranked in a position between positions 51-100 in the world (Figure 5). No other African institution appears on this list. Pretoria achieved position 14 in the world regarding h-impact and position 28 in the world regarding citations per paper. This is the number one position in Africa.



Source: Compiled by J. Buitendag.

FIGURE 5: Three faculties of Theology in Africa among the top 100 of the QS WUR.

Firstly, religion is not dying in the world, despite the advancement of science, for instance, in the Global South Christianity is on the rise and this situation is likely to remain unchanged at least for the next few decades (Werner 2011:94); and secondly, in Southern Africa most church leaders lack theological education because of prohibitive costs (Werner 2011:96). Thus, if the UP finds ways and encourages policies to theologically and religiously instruct not only people from SA but also from the whole region of Southern Africa, its chances to expand its social, intellectual, and cultural influence will grow exponentially.

■ Findings and proposals

As a field of scientific inquiry, TRS is at crossroads. In order for it to thrive in the academic environment, the whole system which evaluates TRS from the perspective of its scholarly outputs needs serious rethinking. This chapter has identified three areas of such revision: citations, productivity, and reputation. As indicated in the chapter, citations must be reconsidered by changing the very instrument based on which assessments are made, namely switching from WoS IF to the calculations provided by SJR performed by

Scopus as the only currently valid database encompassing the actual life of representative journals in TRS. Then, productivity must be redefined by acknowledging that within AH, the subcategory of TRS makes an enormous contribution which is not duly acknowledged; moreover, scientific productions in the field must be rewarded by proper incentives, so that scholars are encouraged not only to advance academically but also contribute to the development of the field. Thirdly, reputation has to be rebranded by building an international community of scholars, in the specific case of SA, while equity and quality must be in equilibrium. More international scholars from abroad should be appointed so that competitiveness is fostered, which often results in better output. These three measures should lead to reimagining academic progress especially by turning institutions of higher learning not only into entities of trained evaluators and promoters of scientific quality in research and publication, but also in centres of research productivity which are adequately connected to the high quality standards of global research.

■ Summary: Chapter 1

TRS are two interconnected and mutually dependent fields of academic inquiry, which belong to the larger and more encompassing domain of general humanities. Given this interconnectivity, reciprocity, and interdependability as integrative part of the humanities, TRS find themselves in the same position of being constantly evaluated from various perspectives, including the particularly measurable aspect of research outputs. While research outputs can be measured rather easily in the sense that they are tangible and readable in a published format, the way they are actually evaluated and given credit for regarding their content is a totally different matter and a whole lot more complex a problem. This chapter is an attempt to demonstrate that research productions in the field of TRS should be evaluated not only against other completely different fields, such as natural sciences, but also against closer and

more related domains from the very corpus of the Humanities. It is suggested, therefore, that three distinct features should be taken into account for a proper and fair assessment of research outputs in TRS: research productivity, citations, and academic reputation. These, in turn, must be always complemented by a set of necessarily subsequent measures such as an increased productivity reward, high citations reward, high impact journals must be rewarded, and international to be increased. The proposed ranking indicators and their rewarding measures are going to be discussed and exemplified with specific reference to the research performance of the FT within the UP, SA.

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