

The withering intellectual and the decline of the Humanities in South Africa

Professor Jonathan Jansen, MASSAf

Distinguished Professor of Education,
Stellenbosch University
Past President, Academy of Science of South Africa



The Academy of Science of South Africa (ASSAf) cordially
invites you to the
10th Annual ASSAf Humanities Lecture 2026

Marking its **10th year**, the ASSAf Annual Humanities Lecture provides a platform for critical reflection on issues of significance to scholarship, society and the future of the humanities in South Africa.

Date: Thursday, 22 October 2026
Time: 15:00–16:30 SAST
Platform: Online via Zoom
RSVP: [Click here](#) to register

Professor Jonathan Jansen is Distinguished Professor of Education at Stellenbosch University and Past President of the Academy of Science of South Africa. He is a Fellow of the British Academy and the American Academy of Arts and Sciences. As a curriculum theorist, he specialises in the politics and poetics of knowledge.

His recent book, *On Discovery: How Knowledge Is Produced Across the Disciplines*, was published by Cambridge University Press. He also works with dysfunctional schools and from these labours he published *Worth the fight* (2026), offering new pedagogical theory on the workings of class in education.

ABSTRACT

At the dawn of our democracy, South Africa enjoyed a rich network of academic associations and courageous individuals who had refined a tradition of criticism and resistance focused on the apartheid state. Since the 1990s, that network weakened and, with its dissolution, came the withering intellectual within the corridors of academia. We were more likely to see critical inquiry within the domain of investigative journalism rather than among university academics. Through an analysis of seven critical cases in universities over the past three decades, instances that should have energized the academic activist community to stand up and confront a creeping authoritarianism, we found instead that the withering intellectual was being replaced by the patriotic comrade, the tendered scholar, and an army of academic automatons functioning as mere production units for purposes of optimizing subsidy income and improving institutional rankings. In the process, the humanities, as a prime site in which critical questions, intellectual engagement, and the fostering of dissent could flourish, found itself diminished and unable to respond to the new terrain where academic acquiescence is rewarded and resistance punished. The Lecture considers ways out of this intellectual stasis.

PROGRAMME

Programme Director: Professor Allucia Lulu Shokane
Dean, Faculty of Humanities and Social Sciences; Professor of Social Work, University of Zululand

15:00–15:05	Welcome and Opening	Professor Allucia Lulu Shokane
15:05–15:15	Remarks on ASSAf and Introduction of the Speaker	Professor Himla Soodyall, MASSAf, Executive Officer, ASSAf
15:15–15:55	10th Annual Humanities Lecture: The withering intellectual and the decline of the humanities in South Africa	Professor Jonathan Jansen, MASSAf, Distinguished Professor of Education, Stellenbosch University
15:55–16:20	Questions and Discussion	Facilitated by Professor AL Shokane
16:20–16:25	Vote of Thanks	Professor Siona O' Connell, Faculty of Humanities, University of Pretoria
16:25–16:30	Closing	Professor Allucia Lulu Shokane

SPEAKERS



Professor Himla Soodyall, is the Executive Officer of the Academy of Science of South Africa (ASSAf). She previously served as a Research Professor in Human Genetics at the University of the Witwatersrand and as Principal Medical Scientist at the National Health Laboratory Service. Prof Soodyall is internationally recognised for her pioneering genetic research on the peoples of sub-Saharan Africa. Her work has identified some of the oldest known DNA lineages present in living populations today, providing important evidence supporting the theory that modern humans evolved in what is now southern Africa. Beyond her scientific contributions, she has played a leading role in advancing public understanding of genetics and promoting ethical, inclusive research practices. She is also an international member of the National Academy of Sciences, reflecting her global standing in the field. Widely respected as a geneticist and science communicator, Prof Soodyall is a strong advocate for respect, equity, and the responsible application of science in society.



Professor Allucia Lulu Nkosi-Shokane is Dean of the Faculty of Humanities and Social Sciences at the University of Zululand, having previously served as Deputy Dean: Research, Innovation and Internationalisation. She is a Professor of Social Work and holds a doctoral degree in Social Work from the University of Johannesburg. Her scholarship spans Social Work and Community Development, with particular interests in critical and radical social work, decolonised methodologies, Indigenous Knowledge and practices, asset-oriented community-led development, and Social Sciences and Humanities education. She previously served as Vice-President of the Association of South African Social Work Education Institutions (ASASWEI) and as a regional mentor for the National Institute for the Humanities and Social Sciences (NIHSS) doctoral schools capacity-building initiatives in KwaZulu-Natal. She is a National Research Foundation (NRF)-rated researcher, a former Editor-in-Chief of *Inkanyiso: Journal of African Thought*, and currently serves on the Academy of Science of South Africa (ASSAf) Standing Committee on Humanities.



Professor Siona O'Connell is a Professor in the Department of Humanities at the University of Pretoria and Chairperson of the Academy of Science of South Africa's (ASSAf) Standing Committee on the Humanities. Her academic work spans the humanities and interdisciplinary scholarship, with a particular interest in strengthening the role of the humanities in addressing complex societal challenges. Through her research, teaching and academic leadership, she contributes to advancing critical, evidence-informed perspectives on issues affecting South African society. As Chairperson of ASSAf's Standing Committee on the Humanities, she provides leadership in promoting excellence in humanities scholarship and strengthening the contribution of the humanities to South Africa's science, technology and innovation landscape.