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**THE SOCIAL SCIENCES AND SOCIO-  
ECONOMIC TRANSFORMATION IN  
AFRICA**

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# Current Trends in Social Science Postgraduate Training and Research in Africa: Interdisciplinarity\*

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## Introduction

Now in their third to fourth decades of existence, a good number of African universities are beginning to give considerable attention to postgraduate training and research. This is a welcome development dictated more or less by the prevailing social, economic and technological backwardness of most African countries and the pressing need for them to survive, function and compete in the postmodern, knowledge-based, global society of the 21<sup>st</sup> century. As predicted by Daniel Bell, in the postmodern world, knowledge has become the primary resource of society; superseding agriculture and industry as the means for wealth production, with 'knowledge workers' replacing factory workers as the primary producers of wealth (Bell, 1974; Meek, 2000). Such a knowledge-driven, knowledge-dependent society demands a constantly changing, high level competencies and expertise necessary for its continued growth and prosperity. In today's world, theoretical knowledge has become the basis of innovation and policy-making, so that individuals, groups and professions that possess it come to exert influence on both the economy and the polity (Watson, 1955; Le Grange, 2002; Obikeze, 2003).

Among the foremost traditional functions of the university as a social institution (more precisely, a sub-institution of education), are the production of new knowledge, extension of existing knowledge, and the impartation of knowledge together with its requisite skills and methodologies. Generally, the university carries out these institutional functions through its postgraduate research and training programmes. Although, as it has been rightly observed, the academy "has never had a complete monopoly over the production and

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dissemination of knowledge" (Meek, 2000), but it has, down the ages, retained its pride of place as the custodian of knowledge and primary source of new ideas, critical thinking and, often, revolutionary change. This explains the position and overriding importance of the university in general, and the postgraduate research and training programmes in particular, in the emerging new millennium. In the words of Daniel Bell "the university increasingly becomes the primary institution of the post-industrial society" (1974:245).

For African countries entering the new century from a position of weakness and overall disadvantage, the necessity for accelerated postgraduate research and training programmes, both as a survival strategy and a coping mechanism against the unkind forces of globalization and postmodernism, can hardly be overemphasized.

In a different paper, I had recommended *Transformative Education* as the most appropriate for tackling "the emergency situation facing the African continent in the 21<sup>st</sup> century" (Obikeze, 2003:2). That recommendation was primarily in relation to the undergraduate university education. In the present discourse, attention is focused on the nature and current trends in postgraduate training and research, with particular reference to the social sciences; the implicit objective being to point to the direction African universities should go to meet the needs of the postmodern knowledge society. To provide a necessary background, I will start with a brief overview of the global trends in social science postgraduate education.

### **Global Trends**

Two closely related but distinct features of postmodernism, which are having profound impacts on higher education worldwide, are globalization and the information and communication technology (ICT) revolution. In the words of Sall (2001), "with globalization, liberalization and democratization also come new 'modes' of higher learning and new kinds of knowledge that are more problem-oriented than the knowledge produced in traditional higher education and research institutions" (2001:5). While globalization brought with it the internationalization and commodification of higher education, the information and communication technology revolution has introduced enormous flexibility, diversity and incredible speed in the way knowledge is produced, reproduced, packaged and delivered throughout the world. For, "of all social resources, it is knowledge, because of its depersonalized and universalistic nature, that lends itself most easily to globalization" (Delanty, 2001:4).

The combined effect of all the 'new forces' is a noticeable global shift with regard to where, by whom, and how knowledge – the most valuable resource of

the postmodern world – is produced and disseminated. According to Gerald Delanty:

Today we are witnessing the end of the mode of knowledge that emerged along with organized modernity and its cultural model and institutional framework. Specialization within disciplinary and national boundaries has ceased to be the exclusive kind of knowledge that is being produced, and the university is no longer the privileged site of knowledge (2001:3-4).

For most of the industrialized Western world in general, and the United States and Canada in particular, the 1980s marked the turning point “when faculty and universities were incorporated into the market to the point where professional work began to be patterned differently, in kind rather than in degree”. More specifically, this means that in the universities, both the curricula and the research agenda were increasingly “being skewed toward subject areas that have commercial value rather than what might promote the public good” (Carson, 2000:1). Disciplinary boundaries were fast becoming blurred as interdisciplinarity and multidisciplinary became the preferred and often required model of research within the university (Delanty, 2001:3).

With regard to the trends in Eastern Europe, Michal Illner (2004) found that one of the “characteristic features of Czech sociological studies in the 1990s” was the “uncertain disciplinary identity of many studies due to the thematic and methodological interpenetration of sociology and its adjacent disciplines – economics, political science, demography, social anthropology, and social geography” (i.e. interdisciplinarity).

Similarly, in a recent publication, *Contemporary Sociology in Pakistan*, Gardezi (1994) affirmed that since the 1980s, ‘new dimensions’ had been added to the traditional mode of sociological investigation. According to him, “a number of Pakistani sociologists have turned to the interdisciplinary perspective of political economy.” One of the first to do so was Hamza Alavi who applied an interdisciplinary theoretical framework to study “the social base of authoritarian rule in Pakistan and substantiated the now-famous thesis of relative autonomy and over-development of the state in post-colonial societies relative to other civil institutions”. In the United Kingdom, Michael Gibbons, Director of the Science Policy Unit of the University of Sussex, and his colleagues, in their recent book *The New Production of Knowledge*, called attention of the academic world, to the emergence of a new approach to knowledge creation which they labeled *Mode 2* as different from the traditional, discipline-based approach which is still generally and ‘popularly’ regarded as “the ideal for university research” and training, labeled *Mode 1* (Ang, 2004:2). This new approach, which is increasingly gaining prominence over the traditional Mode

1, is more problem-focused, interdisciplinary and collaborative in orientation. "Here, problems are defined in the context of application rather than a disciplinary framework" and the emphasis is on following an interdisciplinary approach.

The Australian National University has advanced further than *Model 2* idea by creating a new "Specialization" called *Integration and Implementation Sciences*; the objective of which is the production and dissemination of a new knowledge base for enhancing the use and application of diverse array of epistemologies, methodologies, trans- and inter-disciplinary, as well as other integrative and implementation strategies to address and seek solutions to highly complex issues and problems of the postmodern society (Bammer, 2003).

In summary, it can be said from the above overview, that the clearest global trends in postgraduate research and training are toward some form of interdisciplinarity and the market orientation.

### **African Trends**

Although centres of learning, knowledge production and academic excellence of university equivalence existed in various parts of African continent centuries before European contact (Ajayi, et al.1996), the modern university, like the modern state, is a legacy of Western colonialism. Its origin is traceable to the 20<sup>th</sup> century colonial administration in the continent. By the same token, the history of research-based scientific knowledge in general, and social science teaching and research, in particular, are closely tied to that of the modern university in Africa. Consequently, to contextualize current developments and trends in social science postgraduate training and research in Africa, it is necessary to link them to the history and development of modern university education in the continent (Mamdani, 1998; Sall, 2001). Furthermore, the modern university is ideally international in outlook and orientation relative to other social institutions. Therefore it cannot be insulated from global developments and trends in higher education system outlined earlier. It is from this background that I proceed to examine current trends in social science training and research in Africa.

Based on the works of Aina (1994) and Tadesse (1999), the history of the development of modern university, the field of social sciences, as well as training and research in the social sciences in Africa may be periodized into four broad phases each of which ushered in a new 'generation' of institutions, scholars and students (Sall, 2001:17). These are labeled the Colonial phase, the Independence / Development phase, the Crisis phase and the Post Structural-Adjustment phase. It needs to be stressed that this periodization is for purely analytical purposes. The phases are by no means 'clear cut' or mutually exclusive; rather there are considerable overlaps between and among them.

In discussing each phase, effort will be made to portray the continental modal features and institutional objectives of the university system; the level of development or state of establishment of the social science field; a characterization of that generation of scholars and students; and the nature, focus and direction of social science scholarship, training and research during the period. In so doing, it is hoped not only to identify the current trends in postgraduate training and research, but also to demonstrate the successive shifts and changes that led up to the present state.

#### **A. The Colonial Phase**

During this period, which covered from about 1900 to 1959, higher educational institutions in Africa were mainly colleges or overseas extensions of universities in the colonizing countries. The institutions were located in Uganda, Ethiopia, Egypt, Morocco, Tunisia, Algeria, Sierra Leone, Ghana, Nigeria, Senegal, Rhodesia and South Africa. As instruments of the colonial administration, their institutional objective was to develop the human capital for the public sector (Sall, 2001). The institutions were small, elitist and fairly well funded.

Social science, as we know it today, was not fully developed in colonial times although some of the core disciplines like economics; history, government and geography were generally taught in the Arts. Mainly expatriate scholars drawn from the 'home' universities staffed the institutions. Postgraduate education, where existent, was at its cradle and the focus of research was traditionally on colonial history, geography and ethnography.

#### **B. The Independence and Development Phase**

This period covering from 1960 to about 1976 was the time when most of the countries in sub-Saharan Africa gained their political independence and modern statehood. It was marked by high hopes, expectations and universal enthusiasm to be part of, and contribute whatever talents one had to national development and nation-building. There was rapid expansion of higher educational institutions leading to a rise in student enrolments. Institutes of development studies were established in almost every university. Institutional objectives of the universities were to Africanize higher education and provide the intellectual guide to national development.

Social Science was fairly established in most of the universities and some postgraduate training and research initiated in few of the older institutions. The first generation of African scholars who were born and raised under colonialism but got trained abroad, mostly in Europe and America, returned home to form the nucleus of faculty in the new universities. However they experienced severe restrictions of freedom of expression and enquiry as critical thinking was

subordinated to the developmental cause and social commitment of staff was considered as important as their scholarship (Sall, 2001:18). 'Critical silence' prevailed but a division between those closely linked to the state developmental initiative and the 'populist' scholars who exhibited greater sympathy for the masses was evident.

Research priorities were "those of the policy agenda of the state" with the classical modernization and development theories as the primary explanatory paradigms (Sall, 2001:38).

### **C. The Crisis Phase (1977 – 1990).**

Throughout the continent, the implementation of the Structural Adjustment Programme in the late 1970s and '80s had very adverse effects on the social and economic life of the people in general, and the university system in particular. As government funding for the universities dwindled and dried up, teaching and research facilities deteriorated; staff morale sagged and massive exodus set in resulting in serious setbacks for academic programmes and projects. In this crisis environment, the institutional objectives of universities shifted to carrying out fundamental structural as well as programme reviews and transformations that would enable them meet the new challenges while still fulfilling their traditional functions.

Both the quality and quantity of social science postgraduate training and research suffered considerable drawbacks due to inadequate funding and poor staffing as the second generation of African scholars trained abroad failed to return home while the older ones continued to leave.

Donor agencies and NGOs provided the major part of whatever research funds were available. Intellectually, the political economy perspective provided the predominant theoretical paradigm for research in the social sciences.

### **D. The Post-Structural Adjustment Phase.**

This period dates from about 1991 to the present. Some of its significant features are the emergence of entrepreneurial public universities, private universities and virtual universities; pluralization of the sites for social science knowledge production and dissemination through the establishment of independent research centres and institutes by universities (e.g. Africa Gender Institute at the University of Cape Town), professional bodies, government ministries, business organizations and NGOs; the establishment of training and research centres by the United Nations, Regional and Sub-regional organizations; and the globalization of higher education. During this period, the emerging institutional objective of the university may be described as the achievement of marketability and enhanced local as well as global competitiveness.



Substantial increase in the number of universities offering Ph.D. degrees in the social science has been recorded although the total enrollment remains lower than in other world regions. A large proportion of the academic staff consists of the third generation scholars who obtained their training in Africa and who, though bright and talented still lack requisite experience and research skills. Staff turnover remains high leading to weak institutional capacity in many African universities (Sall, 2001:25).

By the end of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, social science has become Africanized and fairly established in most universities with the core disciplines – economics, political science and sociology – attaining the highest levels of institutionalization (Sall, 2001:32).

As would be expected, recent trends in postgraduate training and research in the social sciences are heavily influenced, if not dictated, by the globalization of higher education. Consequently, training and research are increasingly market-oriented. More specifically, with regard to postgraduate teaching, the current patterns and trends may be summarized as follows:

- a) the emergence and spread of interdisciplinary fields within the social sciences;
- b) the formation of theme/subject-based networks and work groups;
- c) the development of (inter-field) links with the humanities, health sciences and natural sciences (Chachage 2001, Sall2001).

Development Studies is about the earliest and most widespread of the inter-disciplinary fields. Other fields of note are the Gender Studies, Social Policy Studies, Cultural Studies, Environmental Studies, Indigenous (Traditional) Knowledge Studies.

Among the most important networks is the Association for African Women on Research and Development (AAWORD), Council for the Development of Social Science Research in Africa (CODESRIA), Organization for Social Science Research in Eastern and Southern Africa (OSSREA), South African Institute of Policy Studies (SARIPS).

Linkage studies with other fields include social, cultural and linguistic studies; medical and social psychology studies; economic, agricultural and community development studies.

As regards social science research, Sall (2001: 21-2) summarized the recent trends and patterns as follows:

While the teaching of social science is still mainly a university activity, research is no longer confined to the university. Independent research centres and regional and sub-regional organizations and institutions such as SAPES/SARIPS and Organization for Social Science Research in Eastern and Southern Africa (OSSREA), and discipline-based

professional associations and consortia African Association of Political Science(AAPS), Pan African Anthropological Association (PAAA), African Economic Research Consortium (AERC), AAWORD etc.), have become important centres of research.

In addition, a number of research NGOs and government research councils are involved in research. Many of these organizations and institutions combine research with some form of training, particularly in research methodology.

Both within and outside the university, there are clear indications of a shift from concern with and concentration on the state and development, involving single subject issues, to a diversified range of issues dictated mainly by the market forces and reflecting the increasing complexity of the postmodern society (Sall 2001). Furthermore, there is a clear preference for, and trend towards interdisciplinary research carried out through multi-disciplinary research teams and networks.

In summary, it needs to be pointed out that while the various institutional reforms, changes in study focus and curriculum, as well as the paradigm shifts discussed above represent developments at the cutting edges of social science postgraduate training and research practice, the fact remains that for most of the African continent, the traditional forms of social science knowledge production (Gibbons' Mode 1), in the traditional public universities, remains the predominant mode.

### **Interdisciplinarity: Meaning and Approaches**

Of all the emerging patterns and trends in social science postgraduate training and research identified above, the one that appears to be most dominant and universal is the trend towards interdisciplinarity. The concept therefore demands a closer attention and consideration. In the sections that follow, I will attempt a formal definition of the concept as it applies to the social sciences, review its advantages and suggest how it can be developed and applied among social sciences postgraduate students.

In the social sciences, interdisciplinarity is seen and defined as the process or way of systematically viewing, studying, analyzing, interpreting, and thereby understanding an issue, a subject matter or an aspect of social life from two or more different disciplinary perspectives. That is, by pooling together in a form of synthesis, the essential knowledge bases, the epistemologies, theories, methodologies and operational procedures considered specific to each of the two or more disciplines.

According to Jeremy Hunsinger, "interdisciplinarity is the use of tools, methods, theories, etc. of a variety of traditional disciplines in pursuit of a topic that is not covered adequately by any discipline"(2004:2). Similarly, Klein and

Newell (1998) define interdisciplinary studies as "a process of answering a question, solving a problem, or addressing a topic that is too broad or complex to be dealt with adequately by a single discipline or profession" (1998:3).

It is necessary to highlight some of the essential features and characteristics of interdisciplinarity implicit in the above definitions. The first is that successful interdisciplinarity is built on strong disciplinary foundations. As Kieran Healy simplistically put it, "The thing about interdisciplinarity is, for people to be interdisciplinary, you need disciplines" (2004:1). This point is amplified later.

The second is that interdisciplinarity is not a research methodology. It is simply an intellectual orientation, a model or an approach to social research and problem solving. Thirdly, the interdisciplinary approach is integrative and synthetic. "Simply drawing on the concepts or methodologies of multiple disciplines does not automatically constitute interdisciplinary analysis" (Seipel, 2002:2). By this is meant that the various elements of knowledge and insights contributed by different disciplines are not treated as isolated, independent entities but are fused and synthesized into distinctively new insights and knowledge forms. This leads directly to the fourth point, namely, that interdisciplinarity ultimately results in the creation of new knowledge. As Michael Seipel asserts, "the creation of new knowledge often characterizes the richest interdisciplinary work" (2002:3).

Furthermore, for purposes of clarity, it is important to distinguish between interdisciplinarity and such other closely related concepts as cross-disciplinary, and multidisciplinary approaches. Cross-disciplinarity tries to view and understand one discipline (or a disciplinary issue) from the perspective and knowledge base of another discipline. For example, studying a dance from the knowledge and principles of human physiology. On the other hand, in a multidisciplinary approach, the study or analysis draws on the knowledge base and insights of several disciplines, each providing its distinct perspective on the issue, but essentially in an additive manner. Users and "students must then make the connections between the various disciplinary contributions" (Seipel, 2002:3). African Studies, in many universities and the General Studies Programme at the University of Nigeria, Nsukka present examples of the multidisciplinary model. In contrast to this, the interdisciplinary approach is integrative and mainly "concerned with the unity of intellectual frameworks beyond the disciplinary perspectives" (Stemper, 1998:341).

### **Rationale for Interdisciplinarity in the Social Science.**

For centuries, the disciplinary model has been the dominant and traditional mode of social science knowledge generation within the universities. Despite the enormous benefits of specialization which this approach confers towards the

advancement of knowledge about humankind and society, its inability to provide adequate answers to intricate and complex real-world issues and problems that go beyond the scope of any single discipline, has become increasingly apparent. Such issues are more fruitfully handled within an interdisciplinary framework. The emergence of globalization and postmodernism has greatly exacerbated the problem and made all the more pressing the need for another system of knowledge generation capable of complementing the disciplinary approach and thereby filling the gap. This is the mission of and rationale for the interdisciplinary approach.

In addition to this basic function, interdisciplinarity, as an approach to scientific social research and knowledge generation, has some other merits to commend it. For one thing, as an aspect of its integrative function, interdisciplinarity provides the necessary environment for assumptions, beliefs, epistemologies and methodologies from divergent disciplines to come into direct contact and conflict with one another and thereby to be challenged, tested and possibly modified. As Ayjay (2004:2) has put it, "the interesting stuff comes when those norms and procedures come into contact with those of other fields and can thereby be evaluated, negotiated and tested". The 'interaction effect' of such interdisciplinary encounters generally takes the form of new knowledge forms different from those derived from any one of the interacting disciplines. In this way, interdisciplinarity is able to generate a more comprehensive information and knowledge leading to a better understanding of the issues or the subject matter. Also implicit in the above process is what has been referred to as the "opening-up function" of interdisciplinarity. By this is meant that not only does interdisciplinarity foster the breakdown of traditional boundary walls around each discipline, but also the discipline-based scientist is himself/herself 'opened up' to the knowledge base, theories and epistemologies of other disciplines; making it possible for him/her to appreciate and understand the other disciplines better. One other scientific merit associated with interdisciplinarity is that it helps to create a cross-disciplinary common-language community among those working in a given problem area. This is achieved in part by clear and precise definition and operationalization of relevant concepts and variables. Finally, as an aspect of social science postgraduate training, interdisciplinary courses and research enable students to learn and acquire the orientation and capacity for interdisciplinary thinking and practice.

### **Interdisciplinarity through Disciplinarity.**

Given the current global trends and the apparent merits of interdisciplinarity, the issue remains how to facilitate its adoption and institutionalization in majority of African universities, especially in their social science postgraduate training

and research programmes. In this regard, the literature makes it abundantly clear that disciplinarity is more or less a pre-requisite or a pre-condition for successful interdisciplinarity (Hutcheon, 1997; Klein, 1998; Frodeman, 2001; Seipel, 2002; Healy, 2004). Interdisciplinarity requires strong disciplinarity. As Claire has put it, "to be confidently interdisciplinary, you need to be secure within a discipline, otherwise you will feel positively rootless – I am doing an interdisciplinary Ph.D.; so I know" (2004:9). To understand how and why this is so, one needs to be clear as to what a 'discipline' is and what 'disciplinarity' really means.

According to David Long, "a discipline is any distinct, organized body of learning with a core set of knowledge, involving a programme of teaching/learning and research, or in other words, systematic training in a coherent set of theories and concepts, and their application to wider society" (2002:2). For Morton Kaplan, a discipline is simply "a set of techniques, a body of theory and propositions, and a subject matter" (1971:6). On their part, Stephen and Harrison (2002) define an academic discipline as "a collective of professional scholars and students sharing interest in a set of intellectual problems and utilizing a common set of procedures" (2002:4). In the words of Michael Seipel, "A discipline is held together by a shared epistemology... That is, practitioners within a discipline share basic assumptions about the nature of the world, beliefs about what constitutes an interesting issue for study, methods for generating and analyzing information, and rules about what constitutes evidence or proof" (2002: 4). Academic disciplines are 'discernible subcultures'; communities with traditions of intellectual activity and normative behaviour that in many cases extend for centuries. Thus disciplinary affiliation provides an important intellectual home base for scholars and a critical context of relevance for their work (Stephen and Harrison, 2002). Members of a discipline are generally housed in an academic department or in a 'school' having one curriculum. The traditional social science disciplines include anthropology, economics, psychology, sociology, political science, and geography (and in rare cases history and law). Newer disciplines like demography, public administration and social work have also come onboard.

Disciplinarity (as well as disciplinarity) is a derivative from the concept discipline. Like interdisciplinarity, it is an intellectual orientation and may be described as the tendency or disposition:

- ◆ to view and understand the world and society mainly from the perspectives of one's own discipline;
- ◆ to approach, see and consider questions, issues and problems from the perspectives, assumptions, theories and epistemologies of a particular discipline;

- ◆ to uphold, defend and adhere strictly to disciplinary boundaries in the perception, consideration, presentation and handling of issues and problems;
- ◆ to select research topics, formulate research questions and hypotheses, decide on appropriate instruments and methodologies for data generation, analysis and interpretation, primarily on basis of beliefs, assumptions, theories and preferences of a particular discipline.

In a nutshell, disciplinarity simply means being guided solely by the *perspectives* of a particular discipline, where the term perspective is defined as an explicit articulation of the basic assumptions, beliefs, theories, norms, epistemologies, methodologies and operational procedures which are considered appropriate and specific to that discipline thereby distinguish it from all others. Thus, disciplinarity is an essential ingredient of professionalism and specialization.

With the above definitions and explanations in view, the interaction between disciplinarity and interdisciplinarity is now easier to understand. The primary function and role of disciplinarity, specialization and professionalism is to generate as much independent information and knowledge as possible about one given, circumscribed issue, problem or phenomenon. Such disciplinary knowledge remains separate, isolated and incoherent. The primary function of interdisciplinarity, on the other hand, is to piece together, integrate and synthesize this disciplinary knowledge into new and distinctive forms of knowledge capable of addressing more complex issues and problems of the postmodern world. According to Seipel (2002), interdisciplinarity "builds on, rather than supplants the strengths of the disciplinary model". It capitalizes on the benefits of disciplinary specialization, "allowing specialists within a discipline to refine theories, methods, and technologies and push outward the bounds of knowledge within that field...The interdisciplinary scholar draws on appropriate disciplinary insights and knowledge base and configures them in novel ways" to handle the problem on hand (2002:2). It follows, therefore, that the level of success of the interdisciplinary model in creating the new knowledge forms required to meet the increasing societal needs, depends totally on the quantum and variety of discipline-based knowledge produced and available. To that extent, strong disciplinarity is a condition for successful interdisciplinarity.

### **Promoting Interdisciplinarity in Social Science Postgraduate Training and Research in Africa.**

The discussions above strongly suggest that the cultivation and institutionalization of interdisciplinarity in African universities will necessarily take a dialectical two-stage process. The first stage deals with the strengthening of productive disciplinarity while the second focuses on the development,

inculcation and broad application of interdisciplinarity in postgraduate training and in field research.

**Stage I:** This stage involves practical activities aimed at strengthening subject specialization and disciplinarity. The first step in this direction is the identification and clarification of the disciplinary perspectives. Defined earlier as the basic assumptions, beliefs, theories, epistemologies, methodologies and operational procedures considered appropriate and specific to a particular discipline, the disciplinary perspective is what confers on any piece of work, be it a term paper, an article, a thesis or a research report, its disciplinary character and distinctiveness. One recurrent problem generally experienced in many universities during the presentation and defense of postgraduate dissertation / thesis proposals is getting the student to clearly explain what makes his/her proposal, a project in a particular discipline, say social work and not in another related discipline, say sociology. That is, the inability of the students to demonstrate a clear disciplinary perspective. A topic like "The phenomenon of street trading in Maseru / Lagos" may be investigated by a sociologist, a social anthropologist or a social worker; but it is the proper articulation of the disciplinary perspective that marks one out as a sociological work and another as an anthropological or social work research. A brief illustration with one social science discipline, Social Work, will suffice.

#### **Basic Assumptions**

Social Work is both an academic (theoretical) discipline and a practicing profession – a helping profession. This dual 'identity' makes it unique among other social science disciplines.

#### **Elements of Social Work Perspective:**

- a) It is client-problem centered.
- b) It blends science (factual information), values (culture) and art (skills) in evaluating and understanding a problem.
- c) It follows the social science methodology in generating, analyzing and interpreting data.
- d) In dealing with the study subjects/clients, it applies certain professional skills guided by its professional ethics.
- e) It always has a problem-solving, *intervention* component aimed at enhancing the social functioning of the individual, the group, the institution ( e. g. the family), or the community as the case may be.

Proper demonstration of disciplinary perspective is an evidence of mastery or specialty in a given discipline. The most important and valuable contribution a discipline makes in an interdisciplinary or multidisciplinary endeavour is its own distinctive perspective. This is why it is so necessary that postgraduate students ensure full mastery of the perspectives of their own disciplines.

The second step in stage I is inculcation and internalization of the disciplinary perspectives by the students. This can be done in a number of ways: first, postgraduate theory and methodology courses should ensure that the basic assumptions, epistemologies, theories and methodologies of the discipline are clearly identified and discussed. Secondly, students are to be required always to demonstrate disciplinary perspectives in all assignments. Thirdly, project supervisors are to insist that supervisees clearly demonstrate disciplinary perspectives in their choice of topics, articulation of research problems, objectives of the study, formulation of hypothesis, the significance (practical and theoretical) of the study, selection of study subjects, the study instruments, data analysis techniques, and the interpretation of results.

**Stage II:** The second stage, which is interlinked with the first, entails a progression from strong disciplinarity into interdisciplinarity. As stated earlier, interdisciplinarity is an orientation of the mind and intellect which disposes one to think, perceive, approach and consider issues and problems in their broad, multiple dimensions beyond the narrow (though deep) disciplinary dimension. This intellectual orientation is cultivated and developed through conscious effort, sustained systematic study, and exercises in interdisciplinary thinking and practice. Interdisciplinary thinking precedes and promotes interdisciplinary practice.

An exercise in interdisciplinarity begins with purposively choosing an issue or a problematic that demands an interdisciplinary approach; that is, one that is multi-faceted and broader than any single discipline can comprehensively treat. Then follows the assembling of a team or a network of disciplinary experts, sufficiently rooted in their own disciplines to be able to present their respective distinctive perspectives. It needs, however to be noted that one single individual may also carry out a very successful interdisciplinary work. An interdisciplinary team may be drawn "from two or more disciplines that share similar epistemologies such as economics and sociology, or from disciplines whose epistemologies differ markedly such as biology and sociology", although interdisciplinarity is more likely to be apparent in a work integrating perspectives from physics and history than those from social work and sociology which already share many epistemological assumptions (Seipel, 2002:4).



However, the key feature of successful interdisciplinary practice is not the disparity of the chosen disciplines. What demonstrates real interdisciplinary thinking is the use of each discipline as a valid source of knowledge in its own right and a valuable contribution to the discussion of hand .(Seipel,2002:5)

Successful interdisciplinary practice results from the integration and synthesis of various disciplinary knowledge and perspectives to generate new knowledge and new insights.

The cultivation and inculcation of the art and habit of interdisciplinary thinking and practice in students can be fostered and promoted in a number of ways. These include:

- i) Providing ample interdisciplinary examples and illustrations in the course of teaching.
- ii) Providing sufficient reading materials on interdisciplinary thinking and practice.
- iii) Giving students written assignments, practical exercises and tests on interdisciplinary topics and analysis of issues.
- iv Encouraging the choice of interdisciplinary topics, issues and problems for term papers, class projects and dissertations.

### **Summary and Conclusion**

Evidence from both literature and practical experiences have shown that since the late 1980s, the global trend in social science postgraduate training and research has been towards some form of interdisciplinarity and market orientation. This is in response to radical shifts in the way, where, and by whom knowledge is produced resulting from the combined forces of globalization, postmodernism, and the information and communication technology revolution. With regard to the African continent, this new trend is just beginning to appear as social science postgraduate training and research in most African universities continue to be conducted according to the traditional disciplinary model. This paper has highlighted some of the merits of the new mode of knowledge production as well as the pressing need for it to be adopted and accelerated in postgraduate training and research programmes for the continent to survive and compete effectively in the postmodern knowledge-based world. It demands the commitment and determined collective efforts of African Governments, universities, social science faculties and graduate students to make this happen.

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