

African Studies Association of the UK

Presidential Address

“The future of UK-Africa collaboration in Humanities and Social Science research”

11 September 2006

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A retiring Presidential address provides the opportunity for some personal reflections on the issues and concerns that have preoccupied the Association in the immediate two-year period. Presidential addresses that I have had the opportunity to hear over the last decade have ranged from the chronicling of decline in African Studies in UK universities to analysing of the trends in research across the range of disciplines represented in the Association. The more limited remit for this discussion today is one which I presented to the Council on taking office as an issue that I would wish to pursue during my Presidency of the Association, namely the broader question of collaboration between the UK academic community and scholars in African universities in the pursuit of research, whatever the topic or discipline addressed; and the more detailed practical issues of how such collaboration does and does not work, the constraints and hindrances that get in the way, as well as the best mechanisms for making such collaboration succeed. The issue was, it seemed to me, topical and pressing in view of the fact that international agencies – the World Bank, NEPAD, the Africa Commission, among others, were re-balancing the priorities relating to education in Africa to move away from a seemingly exclusive emphasis upon primary education development to a recognition of the importance of secondary, and most importantly from our point of view, higher education in Africa. The Association of Commonwealth Universities joint report with the Association of African Universities entitled ‘Renewing the African University’ set out an agenda that has begun to see endorsement and investment from national and international funders. For those of us who have witnessed the decline of certain African universities over twenty years (and I speak as one who is most familiar with Nigerian universities), the reversal of policy was heartily to be welcomed.

It was important first to recognise, however, that any hope within the Association that there would be major reinvestment in African Studies in the UK was not going to be met through these initiatives. The investment was going to be, quite properly, in buildings, facilities, staff development, teaching and research in African universities, not in UK universities. Nevertheless, some proportion of the effort of the next decade would, hopefully, involve putting in place mechanisms for the support and development of cooperation in research and teaching both between African universities themselves but also with universities elsewhere, the UK included. It was this matter that the Association has a direct interest in.

From the UK Africanist point view what was the tangible evidence that some new effort would be going into reinforcing collaborative relationships between UK

academics and their counterparts in Africa? Rhetoric is one thing, reality can, of course, be quite different. There are a variety of measures that have been operating for some considerable time. Inter-institutional agreements bring postgraduate students to UK universities and allow for visits by UK academics to African universities. Fellowship schemes bring African scholars for periods between 3 months and a year to UK Centres of African Studies, Commonwealth Scholarships bring younger staff to UK universities for doctorates and more established staff for research and development visits.

Signs of expansion

But there a number of new initiatives that seem to presage the growth that is being talked about. A year or two ago it seemed that the British Council Links Scheme was about to bite the dust following a review commissioned by the Department for International Development. But contrary to rumour and perhaps as a signal of the new direction, the scheme has re-emerged as an England-Africa Partnership scheme (EAP) with some £3 million behind it and invitations to bid for money are out at the moment. At the same time, the British Academy has set aside a number of its Visiting Fellowships for African scholars, it is establishing an Africa desk within its international relations department, and initiated a new scheme to fund UK-Africa Academic Partnerships with inter-departmental links being funded for periods of 3 years. Applications for Visiting Fellowships and Partnerships have to indicate the collaborative frameworks between staff that are involved, and the degree of institutional support for the initiative before they can be considered. They are not simple jollies for the jet-set brigade whether in Africa or the UK. A further initiative from the Association of Commonwealth Universities, along with a new 'Africa Unit', is the establishment of a 'hybrid career' pattern for staff in Commonwealth (and therefore from our perspective, African) universities that allow those selected to develop something of an international career, working for periods in an African university and periods in a UK (or other Commonwealth) country. So there are signs that the rhetoric is becoming a reality. And very welcome they are too.

Perspectives on HE development

There are, of course, many different perspectives on these developments and the political rehabilitation of HE on development agendas. The priorities of government, and therefore DFID, wax and wane and there are, no doubt, people in DFID who hold to the previous view that any extra resource should go into primary education and they will fight a rearguard action against devoting resources to HE either in Africa or through links programmes. While the British Council had, and to some extent still has, a brief to work with HEIs in Africa, its direction since the 1980s has been to devolve policy to country directors and to cast Council offices as cost-recovery outfits that either sell English or bid for consultancy contracts as clients where DFID or other donors are the patrons. For those in the Council who remember the days when the Council was much more involved as a mediator and facilitator between academics in the UK and Africa, the possibility that that role could be strengthened will conflict with the cost-recovery framework which asks who pays for each element of the service the Council might provide and what margin could accrue, rather than ask how the Council can act as a facilitator of this new agenda, since they are the only UK organisation that has offices, buildings, vehicles, etc., on the ground in African countries.

For donors and funding agencies, the key perspective is formulating the nature of a scheme, setting up a competition for bidding for funds, selecting the best people and giving them the money while ensuring that the money produces the intended outputs through report-back mechanisms. Such funders may also have thematic priorities that they require competitors to take on board – poverty-reduction, good governance, peace and security, women, AIDS – and these thematic priorities are either determined by the governing boards of such organisations or come directly from the pen of the relevant secretary of state. For such donors, success is measured by the quality and number of applications, and the published results of the study or the final report of the project. They are perhaps less interested in the mechanics of how the research does or does not happen or the constraints or impediments in the way of the project.

From the shop floor

In the rest of this address I would like to take a different perspective, one which derives from talking to ‘coal-face’ academics involved in Africanist research, and from my own observations of a number of schemes over the last decade and more. While I may generalise more than I should, perhaps I ought to describe straightaway the experience on which my comments are made. It has been of observing a British Council Links programme that was run out of SOAS for about a decade, talking to academic colleagues in Nigerian universities who wanted to get the support of the Links programme, being involved in the Leventis Scholarship scheme (bringing Nigerian academics for 3 months to London) and the earlier Oppenheimer scholarships (bringing South African scholars also to London), talking to British Council directors in a number of African countries, talking to university colleagues, academics and librarians, in Botswana, South Africa and Senegal, and finally, being involved in the discussions at the British Academy Africa Area Panel over the last two years.

The bigger picture - three groups of players

In relation to collaborative relationships in research and teaching between colleagues in the UK and in Africa, there are three key groups of players. First, there are the **donors** in the form of government agencies, research councils, international funding agencies, HEIs who provide the money for research and teaching collaboration. Sometimes their money is topic-directed, and sometimes not. Then there are the **researchers and teachers** in the UK and in Africa who do the work funded by the donors, the coal-face academics who work together on the project, whatever it is. In African Studies in the UK such people are scattered across the universities with some of them grouped within Centres where there is some infrastructural support for collaboration in research and teaching, but usually not much. And then there are also a range of **facilitative agencies** – university administrations, associations, NGOs, who assist with the running of the collaborative activity and help spend the money. In the UK some HEIs have strong institutional commitments to research on Africa and collaboration through faculty and dept offices, international offices and other local mechanisms, others have very little.

For the second group of players – the academics in the UK and in Africa -- there are a number of areas they are directly concerned with:

1. Collaboration in research projects

2. Academic exchange programmes
3. Staff development – training and qualifications for both UK and Africa-based staff
4. Curriculum development – renewing and reviewing what gets taught, in the UK and in Africa
5. Scholarships, bursaries, awards for Africa-based staff
6. Library and electronic resources both here and in Africa

Collaboration between UK and African colleagues thus ranges beyond joint application for project funding into all these other areas. Before turning to the experience of collaboration and the problems of the current ways of doing things, let me digress for a moment to comment upon the trends in support for HE in Africa coming from the international community over recent years.

Trends in support for HE in Africa

Three interesting reports have been produced by the Policy Research Unit of the Association of Commonwealth Universities entitled, ‘African Higher Education Development and the International Community’, ‘African and UK University Partnerships’ and ‘African Higher Education Activities in Development: the AHEAD Database’. The first of these sets out a picture of the move back into supporting African HE and the particular histories and particular foci of different donors, going back to the G8 ‘Africa Action Plan’ presented at the meeting at Kananaskis in Canada in 2002, before the Africa Commission and the Edinburgh G8 meeting of last year.

Roberts (2005: 3) describes the role of the World Bank as follows:

The World Bank position began to move away from this compartmentalised approach in the late 1990s, with support for education at all levels accelerating and becoming more sectorally integrated. In 2000, the Bank commissioned a Task Force on Higher Education and Society, along with UNESCO, to draft an investigative and analytical report on the role of universities in the developing world. Concluding that higher education can ill afford to be considered a luxury good for developing countries in an era of globalised knowledge and commerce, the Task Force played a key role in influencing World Bank policy into the new decade. By 2002, the Bank openly recognised “the need to embrace a more balanced, holistic approach to... the entire lifelong education system, irrespective of a country’s income level.” As the World Bank has been called one of the world’s most “influential actors in the education policy arena,” this change in approach had the effect of prompting new initiatives towards higher education support among other international actors.

The G8 leaders at that meeting in Canada agreed that:

- · there should be increased support for Africa’s higher education institutions
- · university scholarships should be supported in order for women to help break down gender barriers
- · vigorous support for Africa’s ICT sector should be developed, along with the expansion of digital opportunities
- · the global north should encourage the creation of research centres and centres of excellence
- · resources for academic exchange between African institutions should be expanded, with new opportunities developed for exchange with higher education institutions (HEIs) in the global north.

So what was the effect of this new policy and effort, and how were international donors acting and reacting? Roberts describes the sometimes longstanding tendencies among donors. Japan, for example, had focused their support upon one country, Kenya, and a few institutions – the Jomo Kenyatta University College of Agriculture and the Kenya Science Teachers College. Other countries and institutions focused upon particular issues. The US Partnership for Higher Education in Africa, consisting of the major American foundations – Carnegie, Rockefeller, Ford and MacArthur – has directed a substantial amount of resource at HIV/AIDS issues and South Africa, while also giving priority to ‘institutional strengthening’ in South Africa, and in Nigeria for West Africa, and in Tanzania for East Africa.

Interestingly, Roberts indicates, using the data on HE development projects in the ACU database called AHEAD, that the UK top priority has been libraries, followed by research collaboration and staff development. Germany has focused on academic exchange programmes through the DAAD (Deutsche Akademische Austauschdienst) while France has developed an array of collaborative relationships mostly with francophone Africa, but increasingly in recent years with Anglophone Africa. Scandinavian countries have apparently been generally directing their efforts at particular institutions, linking, for example, the University of Bergen with Makerere’s science faculty – a model that I think would appeal to many of us. Roberts also comments on the differences between countries in who actually implements these development efforts – Germany, Scandinavia and Japan have government agencies who take the initiative, the UK has a mixture of academic associations, institutions and government departments or agencies that implement, the US effort is to a considerable extent run through their major foundations. In all this effort, the consensus, articulated in the Africa Commission Report, is that universities are ‘enablers of development not only [as] targets of development aid themselves’ (Roberts 2005: 29).

The experience of collaboration in research and issues that arise

The macro view of investment from outside in African HE is discussed in much greater depth in the three papers to which I have referred and I recommend them to you. Issues of viability and investment from the internal African perspective I have not even begun to touch, though some of the issues for Nigerian universities are set out on the ASUK website in a record of a discussion at Ahmadu Bello University. But let me turn, in the few minutes that are left to me today, to the business of doing the business as researcher/teacher/administrator in a collaborative partnership between the UK and Africa.

Let me start with an imaginary Jane Smith who is a Ghanaian citizen working for 20 years at the University of West Cape Coast in Ghana, and Aminu Ceesay who, a British citizen, has worked for 15 years at the University of South Leeds. They work in the same field, they have met a number of times at conferences and they wrote a joint article a few years ago. One day they are talking over coffee at a conference they are both attending and start to discuss one of the most urgent issues coming up time and again in the conference presentations they have been listening to. They want to frame the question differently to the conventional way of looking at it (whatever it is) and they both think they know of a place and situation in Ghana which would

make an excellent case study for their developing line of argument. So they work up a project proposal and write it up in the way they want to do it.

Full of hope they send it off to a funding agency. When they get the first rejection letter they say they will not give up. But each failed attempt requires them to rewrite the proposal in a different format for each new funding agency. First it is a two year project, then three years; different allowable costs here from there; slanted this time towards poverty reduction, then peace, then good governance, then women; first with external matching funds then without; first with EU partners then without – by the time they have finished it is quite another animal!

One of the two main applicants is supported by their department because a successful application brings kudos, but not supported by their institution's management because this particular funding agency does not allow overheads that would accrue to the institution. For the other, managing a collaborative relationship carries no credit with their institution because it is not seen to be directly related to individual RAE outputs or teaching.

Then one day a different letter arrives in the mail – success! They rapidly realise there is no central organisation in their institutions that will help them run all the day-to-day issues of collaborating – travel arrangements, visas, work permits, accommodation, opening a bank account as an African in the UK (you wouldn't believe what that involves!), keeping accounts, paying people -- they are going to have to do it all themselves, on top of doing the research itself, but that comes with the territory they assume. Though they would have a lot more time for the research if there were an agency handling these things. They reassure themselves with the fact that some of their funding comes from the British Council partnership scheme, and so they will get support from the Council for the arranging of visas and travel to the UK. While the bulk of their funding comes as project money, they value greatly the smaller sums that are facilitative money that helps put people together from both sides to meet each other and determine whether they like and respect each other – the only basis for a longer-term collaborative relationship. The project money includes doctoral fellowships that ensure that if one or other of them falls under a combi there will be others to carry on.

Despite all the hassle and the heartache, the project produces results and their next problem is finding publication outlets that will not only enhance their RAE profile (and, in my little fiction, by now Ghana has the RAE too rather than metrics) in international journals but also ensure that the data is preserved in a form which is safe and accessible in Ghana, and that the publications circulate in Ghana.

With all the attendant difficulties one would expect that collaboration and collaborative research would be avoided like the plague – and I've said nothing of ethics, exploitative relationships, and imbalances between North and South. But when the British Academy recently announced a new scheme to fund collaborative partnerships between the UK and Africa – a modest scheme with 4 partnerships to be funded for 3 years at £10,000 per annum, they were overwhelmed (or perhaps I should say 'gratified') to find there were over 60 serious applications from UK academics and their African partners -- hardly 'gratifying' when only 4 out of 60

could be funded. In an ideal world I am sure the Academy would have liked to fund many more.

From talking to colleagues in ASAUK it would appear that there are some typical ties between partners – a UK academic has worked at an African university and has links with former colleagues; African academics now working at a UK university with links to colleagues in his or her own field in Africa; former PhD students who had worked together during their student days. Interestingly, the recent initiative of the Association of Commonwealth Universities to support ‘hybrid career’ structures will create the possibility of periods of secondment back and forth as a funded pattern of relationship, something not seen since perhaps the days of the Inter-University Council.

So, what of the many that do not succeed in these competitions? Are they consigned to the dustbin only to be resurrected if another agency advertises a new scheme and they can be dusted off, reshaped to fit a new set of criteria, and be tried again? Probably, but what a waste of effort and what an inefficient process! A funding agency may congratulate itself on the large number of applications it has received, and the rigour that has produced such a small number of absolutely top class successful applications -- but not the applicants! Wouldn't it be sensible to turn the whole thing around and cooperate to fund fifty, or fifteen, -- not just four! (I should perhaps reiterate that the Academy is not happy that it had to turn down good projects, it would have been delighted to fund more, had the resources been available).

Instead of multiple applications to a range of separate agencies, constantly being reshaped, why not do it differently? For example, a combination of agencies – don't the US foundations do this? – take in the propositions as the proposers conceive of them, then sort them into separate categories, for example (and they are only examples):

- research project funding within the subject remit of the ESRC or of the AHRC or of the MRC
- development initiative ideas that look like they fit DFID, or DFID and the ESRC
- staff development partnerships that look like DFID and the British Council
- research topics that look like the British Academy and/or the AHRC
- relationships that look right up the street of the Association of Commonwealth Universities
- etc.

If these agencies could agree a common-ish framework for funding and they each picked up, or co-funded, different kinds of project or collaboration then maybe there would be a real success story to tell. And if there really was infrastructural support for the academics involved, then the possibility of a major sea change in UK-Africa academic relationships would really be on the cards.

But as we compete in our UK Higher Education institutions with each other – for students, in the RAE, in the league tables, so no doubt the funding agencies do the same. As far as UK-Africa relations are concerned there are few winners – certainly not the coal-face academics in the universities in the UK and in Africa, not the

potential and actual doctoral students in both places, not the libraries and teaching programmes here and there, and not the next generation of Africanist academics both here and there.

So, will we ever reach a brave new world? One in which the focus upon African HE in international development efforts has produced the following:

- scholarships that bring down the cost to Africa of UK PhDs to economically feasible levels
- a step change in the number and extent of partnerships between UK and African universities
- an agency that supports the management and running of such partnerships
- a network of offices across Africa that facilitates such collaboration (do you remember the British Council?)
- an integrated system of applying for funding for collaboration
- an equalization of access to library and other resources
- an equalization of access to publishing and dissemination

Dream on! Dream on! And in the meantime, all we can do as an Association is to lend our support to anyone and any agency that is stepping, even hesitantly, in the right direction.

And so, as an Association, we need to both applaud and to push the ESRC and the AHRC, the British Academy and the British Council, the ACU and the AAU – push them into talking to each other as well as to us about these issues, talk more, agree more, and do more! On that note it only remains for me to wish my successor as President of the Association, Tunde Zack-Williams, all success in his tenure of this office, and I would like to express my appreciation to all the Council and the Officers of the Association for all the support and encouragement they have provided me with over these last two years. It has been a privilege and a pleasure to serve as your President.

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