

STRENGTHENING RESEARCH IN AFRICAN UNIVERSITIES: REFLECTIONS ON POLICY, PARTNERSHIPS AND POLITICS

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Introduction

Fifty years after independence, 50-60 years on from the founding of the first (colonial-era) university colleges, and having survived the 'crisis' decades from the late 1970s, international interest in African higher education (HE) is higher – and broader – than ever before. Since the late 1990s, when higher education returned to the African development agenda, there have been renewed appeals from African and non-African scholars to development agencies and other donors to assist in rebuilding the continent's research system. Partnerships with universities in Europe, North America and elsewhere have been offered as one mechanism through which this might be achieved. Others have included direct support to specific universities, disciplinary and interdisciplinary research networks, and regional collaborative programmes for research or postgraduate training.

This paper offers some reflections on research capacity in African universities and attempts to set partnership initiatives in the broader context of African HE policy and funding. A number of themes intersect here, including the push to 'internationalise', concerns for 'excellence', the focus on 'world class' research training and staff development, and the role of HE in development more broadly. The article does not set out to interrogate the success or otherwise of partnerships, nor does it seek to problematise the idea of partnership itself, which has been done extensively elsewhere (Samoff and Carrol, 2004; King, 2008; Bradley, 2008). Rather it is an attempt to explore some dimensions of an area to which partnership is often applied – research capacity – and to locate this within a broader set of debates.

The article draws in particular on what has been dubbed the 'Nairobi Process', a consultative exercise initiated by the Association of Commonwealth Universities and the British Academy in 2007, which has sought not only to identify practical ways in which scholarship has been reinvigorated, but also to

move beyond the emerging technical, macro-level policy reports, and to explore what the suggested changes would mean for deans, departmental heads, and researchers (Harle, 2009; 2011). As this article argues, supporting research requires an understanding not only of specific needs – greater numbers of PhD-qualified staff, or better resources for research – but also the ways in which research is undertaken; something of the institutional environments in which academics work; and the broader currents of policy, national and international, which advance or hamper scholarship, and which determine opportunities for collaboration within and across borders. While external support is valuable, and international collaboration vital, African universities need to be able to define and pursue their own ambitions: access to foreign funding, and an increasing involvement in the networks of international scholarship can at once enhance and restrict their ability to do so.

External involvement in African higher education

External actors have had a substantial influence on the trajectory of African HE since the colonial-era during which the first universities were established in many countries (Lulat, 2003), with several established as colleges under the auspices of European parent institutions. The history of the World Bank's involvement – from neglect to renewed interest in African HE, and its significant influence on other actors, including as a producer of much of the body of research on education and development for many years – is particularly well told (Samoff and Carrol, 2004; Lebeau and Mills, 2008; King and McGrath, 2012). Characterised broadly, from the mid-1970s the Bank came to see HE as a predominantly elite concern, generating private gains and thus a lower priority for public funding; the 1990s saw this position soften considerably, as the Bank acknowledged both the role that HE had to play, and the public benefits which it generated (World Bank, 2000; 2002; 2008). Many bilateral agencies also have long histories of involvement through scholarship programmes or institutional grants, and with the agencies of the Nordic countries, Japan and Canada being notable (Roberts, 2005). The Swedish International Development Agency (Sida) has, for example, maintained a long-standing programme of support to a number of east and southern African universities. There have also been many partnerships, albeit small scale in nature, between individual academics. Renewed interest in African HE in the

last decade or so has helped to encourage a range of new funding commitments from donors, and a surge in initiatives, networks and ambitious programmes.

While international funders have played a vital role, HE has also received much greater prominence in the strategies of African regional bodies. The New Partnership for African Development (NEPAD) has co-sponsored a number of specialist research centres, while the African Union's flagship project is the creation of the Pan-African University, with nodes in each of the sub-regions, and at already established universities. By encouraging the entry of new private providers, and creating new or upgrading existing public institutions, individual governments have also done much to change the HE landscape in the last ten years or so.

Growth, expansion and quality

Although enrolment figures for African tertiary education as a whole indicate only a modest growth of two percentage points, from 4 percent to 6 percent in the ten years to 2009, this represents a massive increase in actual numbers of students. Annual growth rates are well into double figures in many countries, reaching 28 percent in Tanzania, 44 percent in Ethiopia and 61 percent in Rwanda (Mohamedbhai, 2008). A growing middle class, the success of efforts to expand primary and secondary education, and a discourse which emphasises tertiary qualifications as a means of considerable personal advancement have led to growing demand for university places. Government responses have typically been twofold: to push public institutions to increase the number of student places they offer each year; and to loosen regulatory controls enabling private institutions to emerge in order to cater to the demand, absorbing those who can afford to pay. In Kenya, the number of HE institutions has increased to forty-four universities and twenty-six constituent colleges in 2013, (Commission for University Education), while neighbouring Uganda has thirty-four universities, public and private (National Council for Higher Education). Both had just one university college at independence, in 1963 and 1962 respectively. Nigeria's National University Commission now accredits 128 institutions, a growth from just five at the end of 1962, its independence year (National Universities Commission).

However, institutional growth and expansion of access have less often been accompanied by additional funding. In many cases the costs of new places have been met by the introduction of student fees, with parallel streams of government scholarship and privately sponsored students in public universities, but with little additional investment in the facilities needed to support these growing student populations. Kenya offers a useful example. In 2010, the government announced a two-fold increase in its subsidy to the country's seven public universities, from US\$360 million to US\$640 million. However, 80 percent was projected to be swallowed up by recurrent expenses (such as salaries) and a large proportion was slated for thirteen new constituent colleges which were to be created under the seven existing universities (Nganga, 2010). The government also announced that universities would be expected to double their intakes, from 20,000 to 40,000 for the next two years (Muindi, 2010). While some new money has been found, modest increases have been outstripped by the pace of expansion: the government subsidy has reportedly increased by around 4-5 percent annually over the last five years while enrolments have reportedly risen by 40 percent each year (Nganga, 2010). The quality of education and the time and resource to undertake rigorous scholarship have been further hit as a result.

Strengthening the foundations for research

As the growth in undergraduate enrolments indicates, one of the greatest challenges that African universities face is in developing the quality of teaching provision. There is nevertheless an urgent need to improve research too. Research activity has suffered significantly as a result of the funding cuts already described and of the more recent surges in student numbers. Led particularly by bilateral and research funding agencies, and linked to substantial new investments, there have been several recent efforts to understand what is needed to improve 'research capacity', identify needs and in some cases offer more detailed frameworks to implement and monitor capacity initiatives (Jones et al., 2007; Barrett et al., 2011; DFID, 2010; Bates et al., 2011; ESSENCE on Health Research, 2011; Vogel, 2012). Capacity has also been explored through parallel and closely related projects but which are not restricted to the HE sector (Ortiz and Taylor, 2009). Notable is an emerging consensus that, despite obvious technical aspects of improving research – from infrastructure to skills – capacity

is complex. Enhancing research capacity is a long term process, dependent on relationships and trust between people, and influenced by cultural values and political processes. It can often involve challenges to established structures of power and authority within an institution or the wider system.

At the heart of these initiatives are questions about what a strong research institution looks like; what a researcher needs to be able to work effectively and produce work of quality; what the wider research system needs to do in order to support this; what is needed at the disciplinary (or interdisciplinary) level to enable research in specific areas; and how can schemes be designed to address all or some of these needs. As several reports have noted, for research to be strengthened, and for gains to be sustained, several levels of capacity need to be addressed. Individuals need to be supported, through training and staff development; research institutions need the necessary facilities, resources, management and leadership; and policies and funding must exist at a national level, supporting and enabling organisations to prosper and individuals to advance their careers.

Many accounts of the constraints to African research centre on a lack of funding. While insufficient public investment pushes some institutions into serious difficulties, and while a lack of research grants makes it difficult for researchers to undertake new work, the obstacles to research are more than financial; the ways in which research is managed at institutional level is critical. Ineffective stewardship of existing resources can limit the potential of new investments, while also reducing funder confidence. Indeed, as Cloete and colleagues put it:

“The lack of knowledge production at Africa’s flagship universities is not a simple lack of capacity and resources, but a complex set of capacities and contradictory rewards within a scarce-resource situation. This results in a fundamental lack of a strong output-oriented research culture at these universities” (Cloete et al., 2011: 34).

Consultancy and the dynamics of research

The consultancy character inherent in many African universities is commonly identified as a particularly damaging condition. Limited funding for research,

poor salaries, and the dysfunctions of the university system for many years, coupled with the presence of many development agencies and non-governmental organisations (NGOs) seeking African expertise to advise and/or evaluate policies and programmes, has led many academics to pursue consultancy work in the place of what might be considered more academic work. With limited technical expertise in many policy sectors governments have also become significant clients of university academics.

Levels of consultancy are always hard to gauge, since such services are rarely run through university accounting systems. A survey in southern Africa suggests that around 62 percent of academics are engaged in consultancy work (Mouton, 2012). While the offering of consultancy services is an inevitable – and in some cases valuable – academic practice, problems arise when there are few academics left or willing to supervise and mentor, and when research activities rarely result in formal publication. As an informant interviewed by Wight at a Ugandan university commented: ‘most of our social scientists are not institution based.... They are there for hire’ (Wight, 2008: 115). According to Mouton (2010), this leads to a dangerous situation of ‘de-institutionalisation’, where academic work becomes an individual enterprise, with cultures of collegial inquiry and academic mentoring eviscerated in the process.

In and of itself, the undertaking of consultancy work is not necessarily the problem. Academics the world over have been encouraged to market their expertise in this way by universities seeking to diversify income, or by clients offering substantial fees. Indeed, it is an inevitable development, and can even be productive; as many academics argue, it enables them to address vital social policy questions, undertake fieldwork and gather new data (Harle, 2009). The problem lies in the balance between commissioned work and the pursuit of critical scholarship – particularly in the humanities and social sciences – and the extent to which consultancy takes academics out of the university environment and away from teaching, supervision and mentoring.

A number of writers have argued that there are also real epistemological reasons why consultancy can cause problems for African research. Thus Samoff and Carrol (2004: 108) argue that the ‘very process of organising research as consulting undermines the dynamism and institutional

autonomy of research centres' as scholars do not set their own agendas or determine their own approach. Similarly, Mamdani (2011) points to the danger of framing research as a response to problems defined by clients, rather than by the identification and formulation of questions.

The visibility of African research

Measuring research activity is difficult when data collection and reporting is often poor at university and national level, forcing a reliance on imperfect international indicators which tend to under-represent African scholarship. The fact that African research currently accounts for a fraction of international research output is regularly observed. Figures from the Thomson-Reuters ISI database suggest that African research accounts for just 1.1 percent of world publications (Mouton, 2010). These suggest that the continent's output has also declined in relative terms since the late 1980s, with Africa losing 11 percent of its share of global output between 1987 and 1996 and not recovering (Tijssen, 2007). South Africa tends to account for much of this visible output. These figures nevertheless ignore much Francophone and Lusophone work, and particularly overlook work published (in any language) in national or regional journals which are not indexed by the ISI. Taking the journals indexed by African Journals OnLine (AJOL), for example, there were almost twice as many 'local' as compared to ISI qualifying articles in the ten years to 2007 (Mouton, 2010).

Measuring research activity in this way – by the number of articles in high-impact journals – may also act to systematically under-represent much African research, which targets not the international scholarly community but research users – academic or other – at national and sub-national level (Willmers, 2012). Nevertheless, these figures do offer some indication of the struggles that African researchers face as they seek to participate in and be recognised within the international research community. Perhaps most telling is Mouton's calculation that only seventeen universities within his sample were able to produce an average of twenty papers a year or more (2010).

The strength of the academic core

A major constraint to African research – and to quality teaching too – is the strength of its academic staff; particularly the number of staff holding doctorates.

It is not uncommon for courses in some universities to be taught by holders of masters degrees, and in some cases bachelors, while those with PhDs are often unable to develop research alongside heavy teaching and administrative loads (or unwilling to do so when consultancy offers a more attractive option). Compounding this is the so-called 'greying of the professoriate'. Many years of under-investment in training new cohorts of academic staff have led to an age profile skewed towards those at a late stage in their careers (Tettey, 2010: 10).

By way of example, Ghana as a whole has just 28 per cent of PhD-qualified staff, while Uganda has just 12 per cent (Tettey, 2010). These figures nevertheless disguise a number of underlying complexities. For example in 2007, the universities of Ghana, Dar es Salaam and Nairobi reported high levels of doctoral qualifications amongst academic staff (of 47 percent, 50 percent and 71 percent respectively), while Makerere, Botswana and Eduardo Mondlane had much lower levels (32 percent, 20 percent and 19 percent respectively) (Cloete et al., 2011). That each is often regarded as the top national research university in its country, and often bears the greatest responsibility for training academics for the country as a whole, is particularly significant; the proportions of PhD-qualified staff are often lower outside these institutions. The rapid growth of a private tertiary sector has also accentuated divides in some countries. One calculation for Kenya puts the difference at 39 percent of staff with doctorates at public universities compared to 21 percent for private institutions (Opata, 2011), while for Ghana the figures are around 30 percent and 17 percent respectively (Tettey, 2010).

Developing the next generation

One of the greatest obstacles preventing African universities from upgrading the qualifications of their staff, and from producing new generations of research students, is the continuing inability of many institutions to mount high quality doctoral programmes, requiring many to study abroad. Although undergraduate enrolments have soared, postgraduate growth rates have been less pronounced. In 2007, for example, only 6 percent of postgraduate enrolments at the University of Ghana were on doctoral programmes (Tettey, 2010). Supervisory capacity – i.e. having sufficient numbers of experienced staff, and their preparedness to offer effective support – is a particular barrier. Unlike

additional teaching or external consultancy work, supervision rarely attracts additional reward, monetarily or otherwise.

A number of relatively innovative models for doctoral training have emerged, whereby constraints are overcome through a process of dual supervision, i.e. split-site programmes whereby candidates spend a portion of time at a better-resourced institution (often in the North), or on collaborative programmes at a regional level, such as the long-established African Economic Research Consortium or the more recent public health Consortium for Advanced Research Training in Africa. Nevertheless, the potential for split-site programmes is still limited where there is insufficient capacity at the home institution. Even where universities are able to mount their own doctoral programmes, progression and graduation rates may be relatively weak. Cloete et al. (2007) indicated that the University of Botswana graduated four PhDs from its own programmes in 2007, while the universities of Dar es Salaam, Ghana, Makerere and Nairobi managed to graduate between 20 and 32 PhDs in the same year, across all disciplines.

Enabling successful post-PhD careers

The foundations laid at doctoral level are clearly critical but while much attention has been rightly focused on the need to produce greater numbers of PhD students, and to upgrade the qualifications of junior academics to this level, the needs of researchers in the immediate post-PhD years are often neglected. Investments in doctoral training are often under-realised as a result. Many of those who do return home, having completed PhDs abroad, or who are able to gain PhDs on local programmes, struggle to find supportive and productive spaces in which to advance their careers, and their universities lose as a result. Early career researchers consulted during an ACU and British Academy study (cited above) reported feelings of ‘intellectual isolation’ and ‘intellectual meltdown’ (Harle, 2011). While access to research funding is important, difficulties of career progression are often the result of barriers at institutional level, where university structures and policies do not make explicit provision for the needs of emerging researchers (assistance in getting work published, writing grant applications or learning how to supervise students of their own), or where departmental cultures do not enable their junior faculty, or encourage a spirit of collegiality and intellectual inquiry.

Being ‘world class’ and being relevant: from international rankings to national needs

Of course efforts to strengthen capacity do not exist in a vacuum. The growth and renewal of African HE is tightly bound to two twin sets of concerns: on the one hand ‘relevance’ and ‘development’, and on the other ‘excellence’ and ‘international standing’. African universities have long had to balance these competing demands, which have often proved difficult to reconcile. The first requires that they demonstrate their relevance as institutions, by showing how they serve national development needs; the second requires that they build up strong research systems in order that they can claim a place in wider networks. How universities negotiate these often competing concerns, and where they place their emphasis, is important in determining both what becomes possible and how success or otherwise is assessed. The tension between relevance and standing has been further heightened by the rise in global university rankings, and the concern for ‘world class’ status.

Attempts to characterise what a ‘world class’ institution looks like tend to emphasise high concentrations of talented academics: mobile, connected to international networks, with strong publication records, significant budgets, and strong strategic vision and leadership (Altbach and Salmi, 2011). University rankings and measures of international excellence for their part tend to reward research performance (defined in terms of highly ranked journal publications and research funding), the reputation of an institution and the extent to which a university is internationalised. They tend to neglect strengths in teaching and learning and downplay local engagement and contributions to national development (Zezeza, 2012), while the level of investment needed to achieve world class status will, by common definitions, be beyond the reach of many African institutions.

One response has been to push for the establishment of regional centres of excellence, so that there are at the very least some institutions able to attract recognition at this level. But again the measures by which this excellence is measured are still problematic and reflect the agendas and criteria of a Northern system (Leach and Waldman, 2009). Excellence comes to be more about external competitiveness and rankings, rather than about internal quality

and coherence. Given the persistent dominance of these rankings by Northern universities, the danger is that African institutions devote considerable efforts to compete in a system where the odds are already stacked against them, and in the process ignore national HE and development needs. This can also result in African universities failing to define their own missions and objectives.

Internationalisation in an African context

The idea of ‘internationalisation’ has become a major concern for universities across the world, and Africa is no exception. Indeed the earliest (colonial-era) institutions were internationally linked from their very foundation, either as colleges of parent universities or replicating the institutional models of the colonial power. Today African universities are both enmeshed in the internationalisation agendas of their partners, and seeking to articulate international strategies of their own. International collaboration is seen to be a critical ingredient for any successful research system (The Royal Society, 2011) while the international dimensions of teaching and of student and staff mobility are often stressed (Knight and Teferra, 2008). Internationalisation can nevertheless mean quite different things in different places. A report prepared at the outset of the Irish-Africa Partnership reveals that African and Irish institutions had quite different ideas of what the partnership should aim to do, and of its eventual benefits, although there were still common concerns (Nakabugo et al., 2010). Partnerships with African HE are commonly framed by Northern universities’ internationalisation strategies, as a recent Canadian report emphasises (AUCC, 2010). These may either provide an impetus for the establishment of new partnerships, or existing initiatives may find themselves formally endorsed and able to access new levels of support as a result of this strategic attention.

For African universities seeking to develop greater international connections, Europe and North America are no longer the only prospects for partnership. There is a growing trend towards South-South partnership, with India and China both making substantial commitments to the continent. For example, the Indian Institute of Technology in Bombay is involved with the African Institute of Science and Technology in Abuja, Nigeria, while India is also sponsoring institutes in educational planning, IT and vocational training. A Chinese sponsored Forum on Africa-China Cooperation held in 2009

projected that China would offer 5,500 scholarships to African students by 2012.

A number of recent initiatives have drawn attention to partnerships with African universities within the framework of internationalisation (EUA, 2010; AUCC, 2010). The European University Association's White Paper is framed by the desire to move beyond individual or institutional links, and to begin a more strategic conversation at a regional level around the policy and mechanisms by which European and African institutions might cooperate in the future (EUA, 2010). Yet according to an International Association of Universities (IAU) survey, relatively few countries actually prioritise partnerships with African universities in their internationalisation strategies (IAU, 2010). Where it does feature, it is perhaps commonly associated with philanthropy or development – not as a way in which Northern universities elsewhere can advance their own 'excellence'. Internationalisation is, then, far from a neutral concept, bringing with it risk as well as opportunity. The relative disinterest with which Africa is treated in debates on internationalisation led Jowi (2012) and Zeleza (2012) amongst others to rightly argue that African HE must define internationalisation in its own terms, to harness it in support of its own aims, rather than simply being offered a role in the internationalisation strategies of others. Indeed, there have even been suggestions that African universities need to first delink themselves from the international system, in order to internationalise on their own terms (de Wit, 2012).

Although the growing importance of South-South partnerships is explicitly acknowledged by the Association of Universities and Colleges of Canada report and the seminar on which it is based aimed to learn from southern partners, the stated goal of the seminar was to 'share best practices to further advance the internationalisation of the Canadian HE community' (AUCC, 2010: 3). German delegates at the AUCC seminar emphasised that partnerships (if not necessarily with Africa) were important elements in marketing strategies, and in efforts to source the best of academic and student talent.

As Jowi (2012) warns, there is a risk that internationalisation, as the latest agenda by which African HE is to be defined and approached, could

accentuate rather than close gaps in research and knowledge systems. At the level of individual Northern academics and their institutions, engagement with counterparts in Africa is no doubt often driven by a genuine interest in academic partnership and engagement, but the logics of international and national HE funding and reward systems (the primacy of publication in highly ranked journals, and the drivers of individual career progression) are liable to create particular structural distortions. For some, these lead to concerns about a recolonisation of academic practice (Ibid.); at the very least they may lead to the further development of a policy narrative which sees African HE as a variant of an 'international' HE system, encouraging the adoption of funding and organisational models that mimic those of Europe, North America and elsewhere, rather than as something distinctive in its own right.

A number of suggestions of what a distinctively African internationalisation agenda might look like are nevertheless emerging (Kotecha, 2012), while an African Network for the Internationalisation of Education (AINE) was established in 2008 (Knight and Teferra, 2008). The regional integration of African HE is particularly emphasised within such discussions in order to encourage the circulation of academics and students within the continent, to develop HE systems which better reflect the realities of their own countries and regions, and to ultimately develop a stronger continental foundation for subsequent engagement beyond Africa (Ibid.; IAU, 2010; Jowi, 2012).

An East African HE area has been proposed, while the African Union has established the Mwalimu Nyerere Scholarship Scheme for mobility. It is perhaps notable that many of the concerns for African internationalisation reported at an AINE conference in 2011 echoed those frequently identified for African HE more broadly; internationalisation is a means by which Africa seeks to build its research base, develop future generations of academics, strengthen the role of information and communication technologies, and tackle the brain drain, rather than a detached and separate agenda (Jowi, 2011).

Conclusions: the possibilities and dilemmas of partnership for strengthening research

African HE is growing, its universities are getting stronger, its published outputs are increasing, research is becoming more visible, and the sector is ever more involved internationally. Universities nevertheless continue to face considerable challenges, both in their internal composition, and in their ability to interact productively and confidently within international academic networks. Partnerships will undoubtedly continue to play an important role in enabling African academics and their universities to rebuild and re-energise their research departments, through technical and intellectual support. However, they also bring with them normative ideas that in themselves pose new challenges. International links naturally invite comparison with foreign institutions; but as their international engagement grows, so African universities become increasingly enmeshed in debates and agendas – and in the systems of academic production arising from these – determined by and for Northern HE systems, substantially better resourced and responding to different social, economic and political demands and ideas.

Despite a growing body of scholarship, and an even greater level of anecdotal reflection captured in meetings and workshops, issues of research capacity, quality, publishing, PhD training and post-PhD careers are often discussed as a set of relatively discrete, technical concerns, for which the solutions are often primarily financial. While new funding is essential, the human dimensions – the relational, cultural, and political dimensions of capacity building and of daily life within African or partner institutions – often receive much less attention. Much of what we ‘know’ comes from assembled anecdote and patchy data, compiled at national level, or from a few institutions. A challenge to capacity in African HE is therefore to grow the level of research on the sector itself, and particularly from within the continent. Flawed analysis of the problem leads to a flawed response. The continent’s tertiary institutions are many, varied and diverse, and many have displayed extraordinary resilience over the years. It is clear that as a community we need to move rapidly beyond generalised assessments and be more receptive to what African institutions are doing, if we are to understand and respond coherently and usefully to these

needs; needs which must be identified and articulated by African academics and university leaders themselves.

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