

# PAST AND CURRENT EXPERIENCES OF HIGHER EDUCATION PARTNERSHIP APPROACHES WITHIN THE WIDER CONTEXT OF DEVELOPMENT COOPERATION WITH AFRICA

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“Statistical analysis, case study, and common observation all point to the fundamental importance of higher education to development” (World Bank, 2000)

## Introduction

Perceptions of the value, role and contribution of higher education and research to the broader domain of international development policy and practice have altered significantly over time and across different donor organisations (bilateral and multilateral). Ireland is a particular case in point: over three decades past, official thinking has ebbed and flowed, on whether and to what extent higher education (HE) and research merit inclusion in Ireland’s overseas development assistance (ODA).

This article traces the vicissitudes surrounding higher education and development that have occurred in that time at the international level, and observes how these have influenced Ireland’s stance. Empirical illustration of the ebb and flow of Ireland’s official-level thinking on HE and development is offered by way of two case profiles of different modalities, separated by an interval of over 30 years. These modalities, in both of which the author had direct involvement, shared a common intention to harness HE capacity and expertise in the service of international development, but were otherwise different. Their differences constitute a reflection, in microcosm, of how HE’s interface with development assistance has evolved over that time.

## Higher Education’s Contribution to Knowledge as a public good

Although a well-functioning and accessible system of higher education is not in itself a *sufficient* condition for social and economic development, it is demonstrably a *necessary* one (World Bank, 2000: 93). While respecting Collini’s (2012) caveat against treating economic growth as the overriding

criterion of the societal value of HE, it is clear that Africa's prospects of benefiting from the knowledge society seem greatly impaired without steady expansion, diversification and quality improvement of its higher education capacity.

According to Peters (2006), 'the ideas of regional and international development depend on a nuanced understanding of the meaning of "knowledge economy", and the new spaces and possibilities that have emerged for preserving the university's traditional critical functions and for promoting *public knowledge*' (i.e. knowledge as a global public good, as articulated by Stiglitz (1999)). Thus understanding of the knowledge economy helps frame the discourse on how universities might best respond to new ethical, legal and political responsibilities that have opened up as a result of globalisation. Taking this analysis further, Singh (2001) argued compellingly that higher education must go beyond concerns such as labour market issues or national economic competitiveness (important as these are), and engage in 'broader social and philosophical issues and debates concerning the "public good"'.

Peters' call for a more nuanced view of the 'knowledge economy' is consonant with the earlier critique of the 'knowledge society' concept from an African perspective, by Akilagpa Sawyerr, former Secretary General of the Association of African Universities. He described how the concept's increasing currency gave rise to both positive and negative implications for African institutions:

"On the positive side, the spread of modern knowledge offers possibilities for improvements in the quality of life worldwide, through the better understanding of modern hygiene, nutrition, environmental protection, governance systems, and...the initial conditions for productivity increases in virtually all sectors. On the negative side, one could mention the tendency to political and economic domination by developed economies and their institutions; the increasing homogenization of cultures and threat to local knowledge...and the exacerbation of local differences and inequalities through uneven access to such knowledge and the means for its application" (Sawyerr, 2004: 212).

Even if a rather utilitarian view of the ‘knowledge economy’ is taken, higher education can still be seen as conferring a public good, as well as substantial private benefits such as better employment prospects, increased social mobility. The 1998-99 World Development Report *Knowledge for Development* (World Bank, 1999) proposed an analytical framework emphasising the complementary role of four key strategic dimensions to guide countries in the transition to a knowledge-based economy: an appropriate economic and institutional regime, a strong human capital base, a dynamic information infrastructure, and an efficient national innovation system. Salmi concludes that ‘tertiary education is central to all four pillars of this framework, but its role is particularly crucial in support of building a strong human capital base and contributing to an efficient national innovation system’ (Salmi 2009: 2).

From an economics perspective, Tilak (2007) draws attention to the broader development impact of higher education. His analysis of Indian econometric data leads him to posit four main developmental effects of HE: first, that it enhances earnings, promotes income growth and contributes to economic development (assuming that the brain drain factor is effectively mitigated); second, that it contributes to the reduction of relative and absolute poverty; third, that it negatively influences infant mortality; and fourth, that it is positively related to life expectancy.

Overall, the thrust of the discourse on higher education and development in the past decade or so points to HE having a vital role to play – alongside government and wider civil society – in promoting balanced socio-economic development and poverty reduction. But this convergence of analytical views does not refute the observation that ‘the experience of higher education in developing countries has been disappointing to date; its contribution to social and economic development has not mirrored its accomplishments in developed countries’ (World Bank, 2000: 93). The brief historical review which follows reveals that the attitudes towards HE on the part of both influential donor agencies and of national governments in Africa have oscillated considerably over the years.

## **African universities post-independence**

Following the continent-wide advent of independence in the 1960s, African universities, many of which had been established as a benign legacy of colonial rule, enjoyed a period of growth and national prestige, and were perceived as engines of nation-building and economic modernisation. They were regarded by home governments and overseas donors alike as power-houses of human capital formation, laying the basis for economic take-off. This analysis chimed well with the rather mechanistic ‘linear stages’ model of development economics which held sway in the 1960s, the main advocate of which was Rostow (1960).

In the early post-independence phase of aspiring economic modernisation in Africa in the 1960s, many university posts were filled by expatriate teachers from the global North, while newly-recruited junior indigenous counterparts received fellowships and bursaries to undergo graduate training in Europe, the Soviet Union and the United States (US). At this time, higher education was also seen as important to the process of Africanisation, by producing graduates to replace the expatriate cadres of administrators, managers and professionals. There was national pride in the new national universities as symbols of a new political dispensation: so much so that, over time, governments increasingly asserted their rights to ‘own’ HE institutions, viewing them more as state utilities than autonomous institutions of learning.

A paradigm shift thus occurred as university institutions particularly in Anglophone African countries such as Ghana, Uganda and Zambia moved from a ‘state supervising model’ to a ‘state control model’ (Neave and van Vught, 1994: 12), and as vice-chancellorships and other senior appointments became politicised (Teferra and Altbach, 2003). Francophone African institutions did not experience such a paradigm shift, since from the outset they had approximated to France’s structure of university organisation; this bears close affinity to the state control model, characterised by centralised administrative systems, civil service status of employees, and standardisation of diplomas and degrees (Neave and van Vught, 1994: 12).

## **Late-1970s to early 1990s: resource depletion in higher education in Africa**

From the mid-1970s and throughout the 1980s, a prolonged period of recession hit most newly independent African states, and this exerted disproportionately adverse effects on higher education. Public finances went into prolonged decline as a result of falling commodity prices, energy price increases, Cold War politics, trade barriers, civil conflict, and front line struggles with apartheid South Africa (Szanton and Manyika, 2002). For almost two decades thereafter, public higher education institutions found themselves overstretched by a combination of dwindling resources and rapid ‘massification’ of enrolment. The contraction of the public service for which many graduates were destined (resulting in part from compliance with structural adjustment programmes) led to problems of graduate unemployment and an exodus of young academic, professional and technical talent – commonly referred to as ‘brain drain’. The human capital base of sub-Saharan Africa thus became depleted of key skills in agronomy, medicine, hydrology, pedagogy, applied statistics, law, public administration, journalism, engineering, business and commerce.

Meanwhile scepticism began to grow among international donors about the merits of public investment in higher education in less developed countries. The contribution of higher education to economic and social development *relative to other priorities* became sharply contested. In particular, two papers (Colclough, 1982; Psacharopoulos and Tan et al., 1986) analysed the contribution of education to economic growth, and the relative costs and benefits associated with different levels of education. The latter of these studies, a World Bank Staff working paper, based its analysis on earnings differentials, and drew comparative conclusions about the private and social rates of return per capita on investment in different levels and types of education. The main conclusions drawn were that the greatest rate of return accrued to primary education, followed by secondary, with third level deemed to be the least ‘efficient’ form of investment in education.

This view, favouring preferential if not exclusive investment in primary education, exerted a profound influence on public policy thinking within individual countries of the developing world, and more importantly at the

influential 'Education for All' (EFA) conference in Jomtien, Thailand in 1990. The World Bank Staff Working Paper of 1986 had after all asserted that in most developing countries 'the present financing arrangements constitute a misallocation of resources devoted to education because "higher education was the relatively less socially efficient investment"' (Psacharopoulos and Tan et al., 1986: 9-10). This finding was widely quoted and exerted considerable influence on the lending policies of the World Bank itself, on domestic priority-setting by governments at country level, and on the aid strategies of international donors for almost two decades thereafter.

### **Segmented versus Holistic Approaches to Education Sector Support**

Undeniably, investment in basic education is both an inalienable right and imperative for sustainable development in sub-Saharan Africa and elsewhere. The Jomtien 'Education for All' conference was important in that it gave expression to the consensus of the international community in this regard, and - importantly - triggered an annual peer review process which has continued ever since in the form of the Education for All Global Monitoring Reports, under the aegis of the United Nations Educational Scientific and Cultural Organisation (UNESCO). The dramatic improvement in gross enrolment rates throughout the developing world over the past two decades is an eloquent vindication of the positive impact of the legacy of Jomtien. However, much remains to be done in terms of improving the quality of educational delivery at all levels in significant areas of the developing world especially sub-Saharan Africa. Meeting this challenge in turn requires sustained investment in capacity development in educational research, statistics, and policy analysis – expertise that is transmitted via higher education. This illustrates the kind of structural problems which arise when higher education is divorced from a 'total system' holistic approach to policy and planning (King, 2009).

The difficulty for the higher education sector was that the Jomtien process became conflated in the minds of many policy-makers in the developing world, in multilateral institutions and in some bilateral donor agencies, with the contemporaneous critiques by Colclough, Psacharopoulos and others, asserting that government spending on higher education was both socially regressive and relatively less efficient economically. Underlying such analysis was the tendency towards an unduly arbitrary segmentation of education according to levels, and a

consequent loss of a ‘total system’ perspective towards the education sector, whereby the inter-dependence of different sectors and levels of education could have been better recognised and acted upon. It also ran counter to the more integrationist view of higher education’s role in development which has begun to re-emerge in more recent years and which is discussed later in this paper.

The essential inter-dependence between the different levels of education can be demonstrated very clearly with reference, for example, to the second Millennium Development Goal (MDG) – achieving universal primary education. In the final analysis, how can this goal be realised without high-quality teacher education, accompanied by properly moderated state exam systems, a rigorous school inspectorate, reliable management information and other associated infrastructural frameworks? These ingredients all link directly back to the indispensable role of higher education as a repository of expertise and builder of capacity for these very functions. The same rationale holds true of the other key sectors of health, water, sanitation, and agriculture and food.

An endorsement of this more rounded view of things is discernible in the influential *Report of the Task Force on Higher Education* (2000), which though commissioned by the World Bank, distanced itself from - and superseded - the earlier orthodoxies which had ‘relegated higher education to a relatively minor place on its development agenda’ (World Bank, 2000: 39). The earlier basis of calculating the social rate of return was shown to have been unduly restrictive and individualistic in its calculation of efficiency, relying largely on relative earnings data. The resultant cost-benefit analysis was distorted, in that it under-valued the indirect benefits of education to society (‘externalities’), and so failed to reflect the ‘public good’ created by higher education. But in the meantime the damage was done:

“For the following twelve to twenty years, depending on the country, University faculty salaries remained flat or declined, research funding dried up,...university libraries stopped purchasing books and journals, physical facilities crumbled, new building was terminated,...student scholarships were largely eliminated...and new faculty hiring was curtailed” (Szanton and Manyika, 2002: 1).

The onset of the HIV and the AIDS pandemic further depleted the human resource base in higher education in sub-Saharan Africa (Ashcroft and Rayner, 2010: 37; Kelly, 2001).

## **Irish-Africa Case Studies in University Cooperation: personal reflections**

### ***(i) Case Study: Higher Education for Development Cooperation - HEDCO***

It was against the backdrop of this sharp decline in the fortunes of HE in Africa in the 1970s that most European donors included in their development aid budgets provision for support to higher education infrastructure, graduate training and partnerships. In Ireland's case, Higher Education for Development Co-operation (HEDCO) was established in 1978 with this remit, and with strong political and financial support from the growing bilateral aid programme administered by the Department of Foreign Affairs (Development Cooperation Division).

HEDCO's main objective was to promote the development of higher level skills and expertise in developing countries (particularly the 'priority countries' within Ireland's bilateral aid programme), in response to clearly identified needs or gaps. HEDCO's primary instrument for achieving this was institutional capacity building through technical assistance linked to counterpart training, and institutional twinning between Ireland and Africa. Its development approach was governed by the twin objectives of (a) *responsiveness to the local needs and conditions in-country*, and (b) *the nurturing of self-sufficiency in institutional capacity in-country*.

HEDCO had at its disposal the expertise of its member colleges in Ireland, as well as of specialist bodies (such as the Higher Education Authority and the National Council for Educational Awards) and research institutions (such as the Educational Research Centre, Drumcondra). This expertise was harnessed towards the development, management and assessment of programmes mainly in Anglophone Eastern and Southern Africa, in projects such as:



- establishment of new – or expansion of existing – institutions, faculties, departments and units within universities and institutes of vocational and higher education in the developing world;
- technical assistance for course development (mainly undergraduate) and curriculum design across disciplines considered relevant to the host country’s development needs, drawing on expertise of institutions in Ireland;
- study fellowships in Ireland for staff development for teaching personnel of host institutions (mainly at Masters level), and their temporary substitution by experienced lecturers from Ireland where necessary for continuity of teaching;
- commissioned research and consultancy for educational reform and policy development for ministries, curriculum and examinations councils, etc;
- other forms of institutional development based on identified training needs.

Throughout the late 1970s and early 1980s, HEDCO’s project portfolio expanded in step with the growth of the Irish Aid programme. The track record thus acquired in integrated project management enabled it to enter competitive tenders for the award of technical assistance contracts by multilateral agencies. For example, in 1983 HEDCO successfully tendered for the largest overseas technical assistance project hitherto awarded by the European Commission. By 1985, HEDCO’s secretariat had grown from three to eight personnel, and was administering projects valued at IR£2m (€2.5m) per annum, about two-thirds of which were Irish Aid funds, and the remaining third represented contracts awarded by the European Commission, the World Bank, and United Nations (UN) agencies. By 1995, HEDCO had undertaken projects in over 30 countries world-wide across a wide disciplinary spectrum, including:

Accountancy	Food Science and Technology
Agriculture and Agricultural Extension	Hotel and Catering Studies
Business Studies	Mathematics
Biotechnology	Marine Sciences/Aquaculture
Computing & Information Systems	Medical Laboratory Science
Economics	Medicine and Dentistry
Education	Police Training
Engineering	Teacher Training
Environmental Science	Veterinary Medicine

However, from the mid-1990s, HEDCO's project portfolio began to contract and its fortunes as an organisation went into gradual decline. By 2002, it had become practically defunct as an actor in the realm of international development although it continued to exist as an entity for some time thereafter having rebranded itself as 'International Education Board of Ireland' (IEBI). This title reflected a fundamental shift of focus away from development co-operation toward generic marketing of Ireland as a destination for fee-paying international students. Although the reasons for the agency's decline and ultimate demise have never been independently analysed, the external factors discussed below offer at least a partial explanation.

HEDCO's decline can firstly be attributed to the influence exerted at domestic level by the multilateral-level donor thinking post-Jomtien (outlined above), epitomised by the stance of the World Bank 'that its lending strategy should emphasise primary education, relegating higher education to a relatively minor place on its development agenda' (World Bank, 2000). Even though this position became more modulated by the mid-2000s, this re-think came too late for HEDCO to be salvaged.

Secondly, an Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development-Development Assistance Committee (OECD-DAC) Peer Review of Ireland's aid programme which took place in 1994-95 was critical of what it considered to be the relatively high proportion of the Irish Aid budget absorbed by external technical assistance including Irish-originating personnel assignments overseas, such as those managed by HEDCO, by the State Agencies Development Cooperation Organisation (DEVCO), by the Agency for Personal Services Overseas (APSO) and by the Department of Foreign Affairs itself. The DAC Peer Review questioned the sustainability of this modality, and voiced concern lest the perceived quality of Ireland's overseas development assistance could be diminished if it were to become supply-driven and if personnel and institutions were seen as the ultimate beneficiaries of public money ostensibly designated for overseas aid. The Review calculated that 17.2 percent of bilateral ODA from Ireland was spent on technical assistance in 1991, compared with a DAC average of 12.1 percent (OECD, 1993). This echoed a wider ongoing debate and re-examination of the value of technical assistance as a modality in development cooperation, questioning whether it was conducive to the development of national capacities (e.g. Ridker, 1994).

Irish Aid smarted from the OECD-DAC criticism at the time. Although expatriate technical assistance was a common modality used by Irish Aid throughout its programme (not just in respect of HE), the doubts about the merit of higher education support became conflated with growing momentum within Irish Aid to embrace what Murphy (2012: 150) considers to have been 'the most significant policy change since Irish Aid was established'. By the late 1990s, Irish Aid evinced an emphatic move away from funding individual projects to working programmatically through government systems in partner countries, and utilising modalities of aid delivery such as in-country budget support, sector wide approaches and multi-donor 'basket' funding.

As King (2009) observes, the continuation of support to HE could have been deemed consistent with the adoption of these new modalities of aid delivery; indeed some donors (e.g. Nordic countries and Netherlands) adhered to such a compatibilist view and maintained continuity of support to higher education and research:

“There were contradictory tendencies at work in the agency world: at the very time that their agenda seemed to prioritise basic education, agencies were also adopting the discourse of sector-wide approaches, which suggested that there was concern to reach agreements with governments that were intended to cover the whole of the education sector, and not just primary schooling” (King 2009: 34).

***(ii) Case Study: Irish African Partnership for Research Capacity Building (IAP) 2008-2011***

The policy pendulum within Irish Aid, having swung decidedly away from supporting HE in the late 1990s, took a significant corrective move back in favour thereof in 2007, with the launch of the *Programme of Strategic Cooperation with Higher Education and Research Institutes*. Indeed, this initiative could be seen as an example of the compatibilist donor practice implied in the quotation above from King (2009: 34). It can also be seen in the context of a wider trend among the donor community in the preceding years to rehabilitate higher education once again within the architecture of ODA, as major international players recognised the critical role played by HE for integrated socio-economic development and for genuinely sector-wide approaches to education. (Teferra and Knight 2008; Bloom and Canning et al., 2006).

One of the projects funded under the *Programme of Strategic Cooperation with Higher Education and Research Institutes* was the Irish African Partnership for Research Capacity Building (IAP) as a consortium of Universities Ireland (which embraces nine institutions across the island) together with partner institutions in Tanzania, Uganda, Malawi and Mozambique. Almost four years of wide-ranging work was undertaken with funding support from Irish Aid. In that time, the project spearheaded some internationally significant research and analysis of a quantitative and qualitative nature, focusing on the factors which promote and inhibit the development and retention of development-focused research capacity in both the African and Irish contexts. For example, one of the components of the project involved a comprehensive Stakeholder Consultation (Barrett, Conway et al., 2010) with over 300 research personnel and HE managers, mainly in Africa, involving structured one-to-one and group interviews. In approaching this work, themes

were identified in the IAP consultation process which aligned strongly with Irish Aid's policy priorities – poverty reduction, food security, health promotion, gender equity, and adaptation to climate change.

Emerging from the findings (Barrett, Conway et al., 2010) are five key factors which together make up the ingredients for sustainable and successful research capacity building at institutional level (these points are not necessarily in order of priority):

1. The development of an embedded research culture within the African partner institution; one which sets its store not solely by the number of international peer-reviewed publications (important though this is), but including also the contribution of research to effective teaching, learning innovation, and civic engagement.
2. The establishment and effective functioning of a research office which can take research from conceptualisation through to dissemination and manage the research process across the institution, and which can actively encourage 'integrative' cross-disciplinary collaboration across traditional subject boundaries.
3. Increased activity of international North-South and South-South partnerships and networking; a prime example of the latter form of valuable regional-level networking is the emergence of East Africa Research and Innovation Management Association (EARIMA), bringing together Tanzania, Kenya, Uganda and Rwanda.
4. The development of effective research infrastructure, in particular electronic connectivity facilitating on-line access to global research; this is now being facilitated with the advent of new physical infrastructure such as SEACOM and TEAMS, the emergence of National Research and Education Networks (NRENs) at country level.
5. A steady increase in research training, in particular through more and better structured modalities of postgraduate formation and stronger foundation in research methods (quantitative, qualitative, critical

thinking) and cross disciplinary collaboration. The use of a highly structured foundation year of pre-doctoral preparation is one example of this, and has been refined by the South Africa based NGO, SANTRUST.

A strong message underlying IAP's several regional-level training events on research capacity building was a growing consensus around the need to more closely align academic research priorities to the major global challenges of our time, such as poverty reduction, food and water security, health promotion, conflict transformation, and resilience to climate change. As socio-economic development becomes more knowledge-intensive, higher education has a vital role to play – alongside government and wider civil society – in promoting human development, in a way which puts peoples' needs first, and which has poverty alleviation and – beyond that, poverty eradication – as its overarching goal.

## **Comparisons and Contrasts**

These reflections on HEDCO and IAP, separated as they were by an interval of some two decades, reflect in microcosm some changes in (1) *characteristics* of higher education partnership-working over that time, and (2) particular *challenges* that have emerged.

### ***(1) Characteristics***

Most notably there has been a pronounced shift in the level at which support to higher education is targeted. In the HEDCO days, the focus was on strengthening undergraduate teaching capacity, whereas latterly that emphasis has moved more towards graduate training and research capacity strengthening. This partly reflects the success of the earlier investment a generation previously in strengthening undergraduate teaching capacity. A second factor is the generational transition, in that an elder generation of African academics now reaching retirement age has created a need for a new cadre trained to fourth level. A third factor has been the significant volume increase in student enrolment, and the associated expansion of faculty: the total number of students pursuing higher education tripled from 2.7 million in 1991 to 9.3 million in 2006 – an annual average rate of 16 percent (World Bank, 2010: 2).

These factors combined mean that new modes of graduate training are being implemented, with emphasis on cost-effectiveness and student retention in-country or in-region. Accordingly, non-conventional options are being embraced, such as sandwich-type PhDs, joint supervision and distance mentoring. In this context, a recent study, which is also a product of the *Programme of Strategic Cooperation with Higher Education and Research Institutes*, explores in a comparative and empirical way three distinct models of PhD provision (Uduma and Glavey, 2012) and highlights their relative strengths and weaknesses.

Another significant emphasis emerging from the more recent experience of higher education partnership-working has been an emphasis on translation of research into wider policy and practice. Historically it has proved difficult for policy-makers and other stakeholders to identify *which* policies are most suitable when dealing with national priority issues, and to ascertain *how* policies can best be implemented in situations which differ widely. The most obvious difficulty is that of precisely attributing cause-and-effect. Despite these inherent problems, the developmental imperative of ensuring a better quality of life for the poor calls for a better understanding of how higher education, understood as a public good, can contribute to pro-poor policies and help improve development outcomes.

Finally, the improvements in information and communications technology that have taken place during the past twenty or so years have transformed the logistics of implementing programmes of partnership. This can enable collaborative research between counterparts in the global North and South to be undertaken with lower transaction costs and with greater rapidity of response than was previously possible.

## ***(2) Emerging Challenges***

### Challenge 1: Crowding out of the limited space

As the number of institutional partnerships grows, the ensuing demands which these exert on the southern partners' institutional resources is considerable, in terms of time, funding, and infrastructure; equally so are the demands made in terms of the institutional dynamics of maintaining cross-cultural and equitable partnerships, in terms of cohesion, complementarity, and priority-setting. As

Teferra observes, ‘the body of development partners involved in African higher education is rich and complex....While entertaining a variety of partnerships is an ideal situation, it could become a daunting task for receiving countries and their institutions’ (Teferra and Knight, 2008: 51). Such overload may be particularly pronounced in countries with a limited number of ‘partnerable’ institutions in the region that tend to attract more interest from the global North than they can be successfully managed at one time.

### Challenge 2: Bridging the gap between policy and research

There is increasing interest among both researchers and policy-makers in forging a stronger continuum between development research and development policy. Both parties are interested in better understanding what works, and herein lies an opportunity for HE institutions to provide rigorous, evidence-based independent analysis. Many research findings could be more readily available to inform policy-makers on, for example, poverty prevalence, HIV/AIDS, unemployment, better quality health and education, and service delivery. However this researcher-policy maker dialogue will inevitably have to contend with diverging expectations, in relation for example to realistic timescales for outcome-oriented research work, and the reliability and predictive value of any policy-related conclusions to be drawn from available evidence.

### Challenge 3: Language

Sometimes the higher education sector fails to do justice to its own indispensable contribution to human development, partly because the language of discourse which it tends to use is not fully shared with those who are more directly engaged in policy and practice. Perhaps the description of a research question or hypothesis tends too often to be couched in terms which are accessible to the academic or specialist peer audience, to the exclusion of a more generalist audience who might well be enthused by the potential of a research application to transform livelihoods or to be a catalyst for social change. Perhaps also the mechanisms for disseminating research findings which are of potential importance to development policy and practice need to be broadened beyond the traditional peer-reviewed journals, to include web-based resources and broadcast material. The implications of such an approach for conventional structures of academic recognition and reward pose a significant challenge.



#### Challenge 4: Promoting quality assurance

Enrolments in African HE are rising rapidly, in both public and private higher education institutions, but although student numbers tripled in the fifteen year period 1991-2006, with an average annual increase of 16 percent, public resources allocated to current expenditure in that sector only doubled – an annual average rate of 6 percent (World Bank, 2010). In response to resultant concerns about dilution of quality of teaching and learning, attention has begun to be focused in recent years on establishing quality assurance systems at institutional and at national levels. Although there have also been some tentative moves towards regional quality networks, the main concern has been with recognition and assurance of domestic higher education programmes. The challenge remains a formidable one even since 2008 when Knight stated: ‘the question now facing the sector is how to deal with the increase in cross-border education by traditional HEIs and the new private commercial providers who are not usually part of nationally-based quality assurance schemes’ (Teferra and Knight 2008: 37).

#### **Conclusion**

Having traced some of the significant modulations in the discourse around higher education’s value and contribution to international development over three decades past, and the implications of these vicissitudes for sub-Saharan Africa, this article introduced two short case studies (HEDCO and IAP). These serve to illustrate how the pendulum-like swings in sentiment towards HE as an essential component of a balanced development strategy played out in the specific context of Ireland’s overseas aid profile.

To conclude, the sceptical stance adopted by some prominent analysts in the 1980s and 1990s regarding the (de)merits of support to higher education and research has since been superseded by a convergence of views in support of the proposition that HE and research have a vital role to play – alongside government and wider civil society – in promoting balanced socio-economic development and poverty reduction. Recent and current development discourse tends to acknowledge that the different levels of education inter-lock with one another, forming a continuum, and as a corollary subscribes to a ‘total system’ approach to policy and planning within the education sector as a whole. Moreover, higher education is increasingly seen as a repository of expertise and

builder of capacity for myriad functions essential for integrated development, such as health, water and sanitation, agriculture and food.

There are three lessons which may be drawn from the reflections in this article. The first is that future aid programming should incorporate HE and research capacity support as an integral feature, within the broader aid effectiveness framework. The second lesson is that Ireland's contribution in this respect should inform, and be informed by, shared intelligence among like-minded donors around what constitutes good practice (the European Donor Harmonisation group on HE is of potential value here). And thirdly, that nurturing institutional partnership of medium to long-term duration should be a cornerstone of an effective strategy to harnessing HE and research in the service of development. The following quotation neatly sums up the ethos most likely to make such partnerships effective and of enduring benefit:

“Neither researcher, administrator nor villager is likely to achieve his or her potential for contribution to development until they join as partners in a mutual learning process, committed not to the search for magical blueprints, but to the building of new capacities for action” (Korten, 1980).

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