
Australia-Africa partnerships for sustainable futures

A recent conference brought representatives from academia, government, and business together to discuss research partnerships between Australia and Africa, with particular focus on the practical implementation of the Sustainable Development Goals. So what does the future look like for inter-university collaboration? **John Kirkland** reports.

University networks have never been more numerous – or more necessary. As universities increasingly need to demonstrate that they are global or internationally facing, networks provide a cost-effective way of increasing contacts, gathering intelligence, and raising one's institutional profile.

The ACU is one of the oldest such networks. The Australia Africa Universities Network (AAUN), established exactly a century later, one of the newest. Its fourth annual conference, held in Perth, Australia, in September 2016, was an opportunity to take stock of the achievements to date, and reflect on the broader issue of what makes inter-university collaboration successful.

Strategic and selective partnerships

Targeting and focus are critical to forming successful partnerships. Now, more than ever, universities need to be disciplined in selecting their alliances. For many, this is a question of prestige. Universities increasingly select partners with a suitable rankings profile. It is also a question of time – however great their global aspirations, there is a limit to the number of collaborations that can be maintained.

20 years ago, the ACU was one of relatively few international organisations to take an interest in African universities. At that time, universities across much of the continent were considered to be in hopeless decline, excluded from the priorities of many international development agencies – although some received slightly better treatment from their debt-strapped domestic governments. South African universities, which might have been expected to lead the fightback, were themselves emerging from a period of isolation imposed for other reasons.

That situation has now changed. Now, both Africa and its universities are seen as critical – from both a development and a market perspective. Universities in developed countries have woken up to the fact that virtually all growth in higher education participation rates over the next 20 years will come from

developing countries. Africa will be a major player in this.

If any reminder of this were needed, it came from Grame Barty, Executive Director of International Operations at the Australian Trade and Investment Commission (AUSTRADE). Barty reminded delegates that Africa will be a market of four billion people by the end of the century – many of them young. Many African countries have a median age of less than 20. For almost all of the others, it is under 30. Moreover, the market is accessible – with smartphone ownership and internet penetration soaring across the continent.

Playing a proactive role

Speakers at the conference emphasised the key role that universities could play in accessing market opportunities in Africa. The same is true for the challenge of developing relationships. However, if universities in developed and developing countries want to forge sustainable relationships, they will have to do the job themselves. Governments – not just in Australia but throughout the world – tend to see inter-university collaboration in terms of short-term projects, rather than long-term relations. Even those that do have a long-term vision lack the capacity to carry it through. Governments cannot commit their successors; universities are better placed to.

The Australian government sees its role as a catalyst, rather than a major funder, of such links, and the conference was well supported

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by relevant departments and high commissioners. There were mentions of over AUD 5 million allocated to African projects last year through Australia's Direct Aid Programme, and of several hundred awards for scholarships and short courses available through Australia Awards. The government has also supported the AAUN itself, and already renewed that support for next year.

Yet the wider picture shows a more ambiguous approach to Africa. After expanding support – including the announcement of a new programme of university research partnerships at the start of the decade – support for the region is retracting. Australia's new aid framework anticipates a 'sharper geographical focus' on the Indo-Pacific region, particularly southeast Asia and the Pacific ('our immediate region'), while there is to be more emphasis on private sector development. This will mean less emphasis on Africa, where Australian aid is not starting from a high base. Not an ungenerous donor globally, OECD figures show that just 10% of Australian aid went to Africa between 2010 and 2013. In absolute cash terms, the figure was below that of Italy and Ireland.

The need for focus

The increasing attention now given to African universities means that they, too, need to be discriminating. 20 years ago, universities in Africa tended to grasp almost any funding or collaborative opportunity. Today, leading African institutions are inundated with requests, whether at an institutional level or through the expanding range of projects, networks, and partnerships at discipline level. African universities clearly need to be willing to say no to opportunities that have little strategic value, relevance, or quality.

The AAUN recognises the need for selectivity, targeting its activities on areas of expertise where the two regions have strong commonalities – mining, food security, and public health, for example. Meanwhile, its Partnership and Research Development Fund provides seed funding for specific research



Delegates at the 2016 conference of the Australia Africa Universities Network

collaborations between its member institutions, with previous projects exploring the potential role of edible insects in mother and child nutrition, safety monitoring in poultry processing, and the health rights of mining communities.

Sustainable relationships

While such research collaborations are important, relationships need to extend beyond these. Several participants outlined institutional, as well as research, agendas. Professor Idowu Olayinka, Vice-Chancellor of the University of Ibadan, Nigeria, outlined an agenda of needs for African universities, including quality and graduate employability. Professor Peter Mbithi, Vice-Chancellor of the University of Nairobi, Kenya, prioritised five areas: the development of literacy programmes; the development of partnerships between universities, industry, and government; outreach activities; sustainable research; and ensuring more sustainable physical operations within universities.

These and other speakers related their agendas to the new Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs). Having recognised higher education for the first time, and claiming the support of governments worldwide, the SDGs could provide a natural focus for future

collaboration. Universities need to be at the forefront of the drive to achieve the Goals. Not only that, the importance of their contribution needs to be widely recognised. Demonstrating the critical role of higher education in meeting the SDGs could be of wider importance in convincing governments of the role that universities play more generally.

But the SDGs bring their own problems. While they represent an improvement on their predecessors, the Millennium Development Goals, which were completely silent on the role of universities, the SDGs' explicit recognition of higher education is limited to access and teaching – in particular the need for equal access and provision of scholarships. They are silent on research, although university-generated ideas will be critical in meeting a number of the other targets.

Moreover, they are ill defined, overlap with other international objectives, and are difficult to measure. A report by the International Council for Science, quoted to the conference by Professor Cheryl de la Rey, Vice-Chancellor of the University of Pretoria, South Africa, found that only 29% of the 169 targets which accompany the SDGs were well defined and based on the latest scientific evidence, 54% needed more work, and 17% were seriously underdeveloped. Making the methodology

more robust could itself be a topic for university expertise.

For all these criticisms, however, the SDGs are an opportunity. Just as they focus attention on key issues, universities can use them to drive their contribution to solving world problems. Partnerships can increase that contribution, and networks such as the ACU can help to highlight it, providing a platform to bring together and promote the role of universities globally. By 2030, the aim should be not only to have contributed to meeting the SDGs, but also for future agendas to include the development of university research capacity as a goal in itself.

Realising this potential will require commitment and a desire to work together, neither of which can be guaranteed at a time when universities already have full agendas. However, networks such as the ACU and the AAUN can play an important role in encouraging such collaborations, and in making sure that the world knows about their impact. ■

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