

## Tribute to the Late Prof John Hearn, AAUN Founding Co-Chair

Dinner Speech, AAUN Africa Forum, Kigali, 23 May 2025  
Associate Professor David Mickler, AAUN Co-Chair (Australia)

**Vale Professor John Hearn**


*The Australia Africa Universities Network community was deeply saddened by the sudden passing of Professor John Hearn, our AAUN Co-Founder and Australia Co-Chair, on 1 November 2024, in Sydney.*

*John was an academic leader dedicated to building successful and equitable international collaboration between universities, in service of both science and society. His passion, hard work and long-standing commitment to forging Australia-Africa partnerships was widely recognised and inspiring to all.*

*John's impactful global legacy will live on through the ongoing work of AAUN and his other major initiatives. To acknowledge his co-founding of the AAUN in 2012 and his strong support for the development of early career researchers, in September 2024 the AAUN had formally launched the Annual AAUN John Hearn-Cheryl de la Rey ECR Prize.*

*We express our profound sympathy and condolences to John's family, and many friends and colleagues. He will be greatly missed.*

*The AAUN raises one final toast to mark the passing of our great colleague, mentor and leader, Professor John Hearn.*



Colleagues, it is with great sadness that we lost our AAUN Founding Australian Co-Chair Professor John Hearn suddenly on 1 November last year, in Sydney.

His passing came as a shock to the whole AAUN family.

I was in fact supposed to have had a scheduled virtual meeting with John that very morning, at which we were going to discuss the process for transitioning the Australia Co-Chair role following my earlier appointment as John's successor at the AAUN Australia Forum in Perth last September.

However, I received a short email from John late the night before, advising that he was feeling very unwell and asking if we could reschedule. That was the last message I received from him.

I first met John when he co-founded AAUN with Professor Cheryl de la Rey, then VC of the University of Pretoria, back in 2012. I fondly recall how John generously launched my first book (*on Australia-Africa relations*) at the AAUN Australia Forum in Sydney in 2013.

We shared a belief in the convening power of international university networks to do what we now call ‘academic diplomacy’ — bringing together the academic and the policy worlds to advance international cooperation in areas of common interest for the benefit of science and society.

For Australia, the AAUN has been a critically important platform for engaging with Africa given our otherwise relatively limited institutional connections to the African continent and the great need for building deeper Australia-Africa literacy among our communities.

John was indeed an expert at building and leading international networks. In fact, this quality is perhaps inherent to him: his surname, HEARN, H-E-A-R-N, is an acronym for **H**igher **E**ducation **A**nd **R**esearch **N**etworks! So perhaps this was his calling.

In addition to working with John in AAUN via my time at three different AAUN member universities, I also worked closely with him in another international university network for which he served as Executive Director and led with distinction – the Worldwide Universities Network (WUN). In late 2015, we established the Global Africa Group within WUN, which I was proud to Co-Chair with Professor Maano Ramutsindela from the University of Cape Town.

John knew that the Global Africa Group, just like AAUN, could help to bring African universities into more equal partnerships with universities in the Global North and he deeply believed in the power of international university collaboration to overcome differences at the political level — seen also, for example, in his extensive collaborative work in China at a time when many Western governments have been seeking to steer research collaboration away from China.

John regularly warned us about universities becoming trapped “between the rising tide of bureaucracy, and the lowering clouds of geopolitics”, in one of his oft-repeated sayings.

And true to his skill at academic diplomacy, John had the ability to regularly bring together a range of key stakeholders—Ministers, Ambassadors, Vice-Chancellors, Industry Partners—while always remaining critical where he needed to be, in defence of good principles.

He was continually imploring the Australian government to develop and resource a strategic plan for Africa, including through his role on the then Foreign Minister’s Advisory Group on Australia-Africa Relations (AGAAR), and was similarly frustrated at how the Australian Research Council never seemed to give us the support that we saw from, in particular, the South African National Research Foundation (NRF).

He deeply believed in Africa and African people and worked tirelessly to push the rest of Australia to both understand and value Africa in ways that reflect the global significance of this great continent and its diaspora.

And John was also critical of the difficulties of accessing industry research funding, observing—in one of my favorite John Hearn quotes—that certain industry groups (particularly mining – of which there is \$60 billion of Australian mining investment in Africa) had “very deep pockets, but very short arms” when it came to supporting the good work of AAUN.

Having served in senior university leadership positions at ANU and the University of Sydney, John also abhorred poor leadership in our university sector, particularly those who he saw as prioritising “Leadership as self-service” over “Leadership as service” (of course, he wasn’t talking about anyone in this room!).

He indeed embodied the principle of servant leadership, and defended the core business of universities—teaching students, doing research, and building impactful engagement with local and global communities.

He argued, in a 2023 Op-Ed in *The Australian* newspaper, that “Human factors are what makes a university great” and railed against soulless and rankings-driven institutional cultures that he saw were beginning to pervade our sector. And this is perhaps why John’s co-leadership of AAUN always prioritised human relationships—equal university partnerships—and building a sense of community, the wider AAUN family.

So, colleagues, Professor John Hearn pioneered and led the AAUN with great distinction. Despite his advanced age (early 80s), he always enthusiastically attended AAUN Forums, in Cape Town, Pretoria, Mauritius, Mbombela, Perth, Canberra and a range of research workshops beyond.

And he remained a highly active global scholar and academic diplomat right up until his passing, regularly traveling to Europe, Asia and Africa.

His energy and vision inspired all of us. He was a leader, a mentor, and a great colleague to the AAUN family, evident from the abundant and flowing tributes we received from all around the Network upon his passing, including from the Australian Government.

We are greatly saddened by his passing, and Australia-Africa relations has lost a true champion of the cause, but we hereby commit to keeping alive his legacy through our work to grow AAUN and enhance its reach and impact.

We were pleased to have formally recognised John’s more than 12 years of service for AAUN during last year’s AAUN Africa Forum hosted by the University of Mpumalanga. With John in the room and his counterpart as AAUN Founding Co-Chair (Africa) Professor Cheryl de la Rey live on video-link from New Zealand, the AAUN community was able to witness a special moment as the two leaders shared in origins stories and helped us to understand

the Network's success factors, including its commitment to equal governance and equal partnerships.

Aside from John's wonderful mentorship and unwavering support for me professionally and personally, including as his Deputy Co-Chair for AAUN Australia, one of the things I am most grateful for is that we also took the opportunity to establish the Annual AAUN John-Hearn Cheryl de la Rey Early Career Researcher (ECR) Prize last September in Perth, in his presence, only two months before he passed.

He revealed at the time that he was deeply touched by the gesture, which will see his name and legacy continue via the awarding of an annual cash prize to one ECR based at an AAUN Australian Member University and one ECR based at an AAUN African Member University, recognizing significant research achievements. Indeed, John was highly supportive of Early Career Researchers, building them directly into our annual seed grants initiative and encouraging their participation in AAUN wherever possible.

As such, we are pleased to announce that the Annual AAUN John-Hearn Cheryl de la Rey Early Career Researcher (ECR) Prize will open for its Inaugural Round on 1-2 September 2025 during our next Forum in Perth, with the Awards to be presented to the two winners at next year's AAUN Africa Forum in early 2026. Further details and the nomination process will be provided in due course.

Colleagues, the reason we are meeting here today is because John Hearn had the great vision to build AAUN in partnership with Australian and African university leaders.

In honour of John's extraordinary legacy, and on behalf of the AAUN family, please let us raise one final toast to him. To Professor John Hearn!