



## REPORT

# **Exploring the Development of a Sustainable African Expertise Network in the Field of Higher Education**

*CHET seminar jointly hosted with Hedda (Higher Education Development Association)*

**Victoria Junction Hotel,  
Cape Town  
31 October – 2 November 2003**

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## Introduction

The workshop brought together participants from a number of African and European organisations working in the field of higher education (HE), in order to discuss a proposal to explore the development of a network of African expertise in HE. A strong motivation for the proposal lay in the fact that higher education research in Africa, in both its conceptual and instrumental dimensions, is currently being developed by a sporadically linked, loose network of HE academics, academic centres and NGOs because it is principally funder-driven. In addition, the lack of expertise has resulted in the development of an active non-governmental sector. What is needed is a focused effort to develop an African structure for co-operation in HE that would allow for relevant training programmes and research activities through effective national and international networking.

In trying to get to grips with what is meant by an African expertise network in HE or an African structure for co-operation in higher education, the discussions initially centred on definitions and descriptions of networks in general, then moved on to discussions of the specificities of an African expertise network. Finally, the discussions moved towards practical considerations of how an African expertise network would get off the ground and what preliminary work needs to be done to achieve this. This report has attempted to capture the key issues that arose from these discussions.

## Definitions / Descriptions of Networks in General

The generally accepted description of a network is of groups of researchers from different countries who co-operate on a permanent basis without leaving their local spaces or the institutions at which they are based. Networks were described as different to 'partnerships', 'alliances', and 'consortiums' in that while they go beyond ad hoc relationships, they are not rigid or bureaucratic in form. Networks are seen as central to providing the basis of a critical mass around which people can do things.

It was apparent from the discussion that networks can serve different purposes and function differently. In fact, it was argued that the model of a network is dependent on the characteristics of its constituent audience and the field. In Europe, for example, networks have become instruments for consolidating expertise and resources and this is reflected in the funding patterns of the EU. The aim of most of these expertise networks is to 'concentrate' research and to close the gaps that exist between researchers and practitioners.

In terms of the functioning of networks, there was agreement that one could distinguish between *self-managed* networks and structured or *managed* networks. The former were seen as loose associations that become institutionalised through professional academic relationships that already exist, while the latter were seen as networks that require active co-ordination to ensure collaboration and communication between actors within the

network. With respect to both forms of networks, it was argued that for them to work, there need to be shared experiences and a common history related to a common good and public expectations in terms of the role of the network and the value it can add. In addition, everyone in the network must play the role at which they are best, and an already functioning infrastructure must be used to sustain the network.

## **Lessons from Existing Networks / Initiatives**

Before articulating what the nature and form of an African expertise network in HE would be, a number of lessons and issues were drawn out from descriptions of existing networks or initiatives in HE, in both Europe and Africa. Significant lessons to be drawn from these included the following:

- Not to lose sight of the need to attend to philosophical/political issues, like the purpose of the network, power relations, the complexity of the continent, transformation issues and setting research agenda;
- To bear in mind the principle of mutuality – that everyone should feel they will gain from participating in the network;
- To be conscious that there are three levels of operation of a network:
  - o The production of basic knowledge of HE systems;
  - o Conducting inter-disciplinary research into the HE sector that draws on disciplinary knowledge and,
  - o At the level of applications – training of HE leadership and management, and interaction with government to build systems;
- To attend to issues of communication – for example, connecting researchers, enabling the mobility of researchers, and the use of the internet as a dialogue tool;
- To ensure that a research network adds value to what is being done;
- To be aware of differences between networks that bring together individuals, and networks that bring together organisations, and that it is necessary to institutionalise networks that bring together individuals in order for them to survive;
- To delineate what is done within a network, for example, by distinguishing between leadership, management and research, and decide whether functions should be merged, or separated but connected;
- To ensure that individuals can function effectively by being part of a strong organisational base and part of a network;
- To be aware that knowledge of HE is not all country or region specific – and hence distinctions should be made between knowledge of policy on HE and knowledge of practice in HE;
- To ensure that expertise networks in HE are built around knowledge processes not political processes.

## **An African Network of Expertise in Higher Education**

The basic premise, accepted by all, for the development of an African network of expertise in HE was that capacity has to be developed concurrently with the establishment of a network. In other words, the challenge facing Africa is to

achieve both a network of expertise exchange as well as a network of expertise development. It was argued that networks geared towards capacity building also address issues of institutional building and systems building, which are current concerns in HE.

The question of 'capacity for what?' was extensively debated. There was a strong argument for separating leadership and management capacity development from research capacity development in HE studies. Another argument was made to build expertise in African HE studies that can inform policy. A slightly different argument offered was that the priority in Africa is to have soundly trained researchers who can undertake research in HE and if this includes policy research or outputs then that is fine, but the two activities should not be conflated – i.e. training researchers and producing policy research are different endeavours.

In terms of the tension between researchers and practitioners, it was pointed out that there is a big difference between a network that wants to build the research capacity of new HE research scholars and a network that attempts to extend the capacity of people working in the HE sector. The former requires a strong theoretical basis for strengthening HE studies, while the latter will mostly contribute to solving immediate problems.

There were several opinions expressed about what would contribute to a successful and effective HE network of expertise in Africa. These included, for example, the need to make use of existing capacity ('start with what is on the table'), to build capacity in other centres, to bring in experts from outside who foster capacity rather than encourage dependence, and to establish regional nodes of HE expertise (and how to manage the nodes). It was argued that an effective HE expertise network in Africa would have to include a new generation of scholars who can balance a strong research background with effective translation of policy, and engagement with the global realities of HE.

Finally, consensus was reached on two strategies that could contribute towards the development of an African expertise network in HE. The first is to strengthen the academic capacity with respect to HE in Africa, and the second is to map existing expertise with respect to African HE. Considerable time was then spent unpacking, in very pragmatic terms, what these two strategies would entail.

## **Strategy One: Strengthen academic capacity with respect to HE in Africa**

### *Defining 'academic capacity'*

'Academic capacity' is understood to mean 'research capacity' in HE as opposed to HE management and leadership capacity. It is also understood as the ability to undertake scientific inquiry or analysis on aspects of HE. More generally, to develop academic capacity means to develop a critical mass of expertise in teaching, learning and research in HE studies. It was further argued that one could not de-link the development of institutional capacity and individual capacity. Importantly therefore, it was agreed that academic capacity includes the availability of human and physical resources.

### *Barriers to strengthening academic capacity*

Since academic capacity involves the availability of these resources, a number of barriers to strengthening academic capacity were identified. The first of these related to language. It was argued that academic discussions and HE reforms are often limited because the dominant medium of communication/dissemination is English. It was thus proposed that consideration be given to the translation of key texts into local languages and that resources be made available to disseminate these texts locally. If this was not practical, then seminars could be arranged to discuss key publications in more than one language. Some reservations were expressed about offering courses only in local languages since this was seen as potentially limiting the market in terms of who can attend and make presentations on these courses. An alternative was to supplement English courses with courses in local languages.

A second barrier to strengthening academic capacity related to the low salaries of African academics. It was argued that researchers were often attracted by the lucrative financial rewards from short term contract work and therefore needed incentives to do academic research. Furthermore, academics as supervisors are seen as the backbone of graduate programmes, so for these programmes to attract supervisors from outside the continent, salaries have to be competitive or organisations must find ways of supplementing incomes, or offer special social benefits to these academics. This argument underscored the need to build local capacity for supervision.

Graduate programmes were seen a major vehicle for developing academic capacity. However, establishing the legitimacy of these graduate programmes was seen as a third potential barrier to strengthening academic capacity. It was argued that while an inventory of individuals allow you to locate centres for graduate programmes, the challenge remained how to tap into local needs in order to establish some legitimacy for the programme. One proposal to overcome this barrier was to bring together HE experts to look at case studies of countries in order to better understand local contexts. Another proposal was that legitimacy could be established through the "management boards" of graduate programmes.

### *Continental versus regional co-ordination*

In trying to articulate at what levels academic capacity should be strengthened, consideration was given to the form of co-ordination required for Africa. A clear preference for regional co-ordination was expressed because it was felt that Africa-wide co-ordination would be too difficult, particularly if the aim was to ensure that capacity was distributed throughout the continent. It was stressed that regional committees would have to be sensitive to capacity development in all centres in a region, to counter the dominance of any one country.

A regional model of capacity development was then proposed that entailed the regions<sup>1</sup> working together on graduate courses that made local needs wrap around a central core of HE in an African or a global sense. It was argued that in this way expertise will be developed around local and continental needs. The model was seen as a mechanism to stimulate staff mobility between centres, where mobility could cater for specialist fields. It was proposed that technology be used to facilitate communication, that links could be made to programmes outside the continent, and that graduate students from all the regions could be brought together once a year to share research ideas and interests.

In this model it was envisaged that regional Masters programmes would be offered, while a continental Doctoral programme would be offered, all of which would strive to maximise existing capacity and bring in external expertise where necessary, using available resources. Another feature of the model was that it would establish nodes of regional expertise around a central core, where 'themes' could include:

- Funding – the economics of HE;
- Governance and management;
- Curriculum studies;
- Student issues – around teaching and learning;
- History/philosophy of HE;
- Globalisation/internationalisation of knowledge;
- Quality Assurance.

While it was proposed that co-ordination should be 'light'<sup>2</sup>, it was acknowledged that there should be active administration to ensure that co-ordination occurs in all regions. One way of achieving this would be to have the administration based in one centre. It was pointed out, however, that the nature of the HE field might make co-ordination difficult.

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<sup>1</sup> One group proposed five geographical regions, but this was contested on the grounds that it may be more useful to identify regions based on existing nodes of expertise in HE, which may be possible to assess after the mapping exercise.

<sup>2</sup> That is, free from bureaucratic procedures.

### *Actors/stakeholders in developing capacity*

It is obvious that academics, institutional leaders, ministries and other practitioners are key actors/stakeholders in developing capacity, but funding bodies were also identified as playing a key role. For example, UNESCO was mentioned as an organisation that could be used to facilitate linkages between institutions from Africa and Europe and alliances between funding foundations could support/sponsor training programmes, or even the mapping exercise described as the second strategy, below.

### *Development of a network*

Finally, consideration was given to how strengthened capacity can be developed into, or contribute to, a network of expertise. Here the argument was made that we need to think about the development of three kinds of expertise networks, namely:

1. Research networks – which link people for graduate programmes;
2. Systemic networks – around issues of HE economic transformation, where national/regional development studies intersect with HE studies;
3. Training networks – around training in HE leadership and management.

All of these networks should be ‘open societies’, always ready to include more and new researchers.

## **Strategy Two: Mapping existing expertise with respect to African HE**

The discussion of the mapping exercise centred on what should be mapped, the scope of the mapping exercise and the output from such an exercise.

### *What should be mapped*

The following were considered to be the essential data that needed to be mapped:

- People and institutions doing research in HE;
- Training and graduate programmes in HE studies;
- Users of HE research outputs, e.g. university planners, NGOs, statutory bodies, international agencies, other academics;
- HE forums and networks that meet on the basis of funding and attempt to add value to the field;
- Publications in HE studies.

It was noted that professional associations are often useful to include in mapping exercises, but they do not currently exist in the HE field.

### *Scope of mapping exercise*

Firstly, the mapping exercise, initially, should define HE studies as broadly as possible. This means that any research topic that influences HE practices or policies should be included. For example, science and technology (S&T) policy studies, knowledge studies and curriculum studies should be considered in so far as they relate to HE. This data could then be cleaned up and classified according to publication categories, existing networks and structures, or graduate programmes.

Secondly, the map has to set limits/parameters at the outset. For example, it could specify that it will include only publications after 1995 and will use as its criteria for inclusion research on Africa and not be limited to research in Africa. It was suggested that before mapping begins, there needs to be an assessment of what mapping exercises in HE have already been done, for example, data already captured in SAKnowledgebase and the survey on HE done by the Ford Foundation.

#### *Output from mapping exercise*

The mapping exercise should result in a dynamic database similar to the CV database that HEDDA manages. It should be ongoing and should serve as both an inventory of what exists and as a useful resource to donors. Self-editing should be used as a strategy to keep the data-base updated, which entails individuals taking responsibility for keeping their own data current. Finally, quality assurance must be built into the database management/administration to ensure the quality of the data.

## **Conclusion**

The concluding comments highlighted further issues for discussion but also proposed a way forward. One of the issues raised related to dissemination of information between networks. The question asked was whether forms of dissemination alternative to academic journals could be considered, for example, a publication like the Times HE Supplement. A second issue concerned the possibility of establishing an African portal for all HE publications in/on Africa. Such a portal could comprise a data-base of journal articles and working papers. A third issue raised the question of how an African expertise network could be meaningfully linked to the European expertise networks. A concern was raised around the location and focus of graduate programmes. The concern was expressed in terms of the impact the location and focus would have on the way the programmes are organised (regionally vs continentally). If the location is inappropriate it could destroy any potential for establishing a critical mass of expertise.

Finally, a way forward was proposed: careful and thorough planning of the process and the criteria to be used for mapping HE expertise in Africa should be taken up in the immediate future, and then a funding proposal should be developed to undertake this task.

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**5 November 2003**

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**31 October 2003 – 2 November 2003**

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