

POLICY BRIEF

EXTERNAL PARTNERSHIPS FOR UNIVERSITY DEVELOPMENT



ASSOCIATION OF AFRICAN UNIVERSITIES
ASSOCIATION DES UNIVERSITES AFRICAINES
اتحاد الجامعات الافريقيه



Association of Universities and Colleges of Canada
Association des universités et collèges du Canada



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STRENGTHENING HIGHER EDUCATION STAKEHOLDER RELATIONS IN AFRICA

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

This Policy Brief highlights some key issues for the continued development of universities in Africa. Partnership with ‘the world out there’ is presented as a largely untapped source of support in a variety of forms and the document distinguishes between developing these external partnerships as viable resource supplements for universities, and managing them to ensure their sustainability.

In the case of developing external partnerships, this brief suggests it could emanate from socio-cultural organisations, which has the potential of enriching the social laboratory of university curricula, such as the arts; local NGOs; small to large scale businesses that need the universities for both manpower and research-generated knowledge; and national governments, as well as international development partners and national and multinational. The benefits from such external partnerships go beyond funding, extending into the enhancement of the social relevance of universities’ curricula, research and public service functions. Sustaining such partnerships, however, calls for appropriate managing strategies.

The AAU will continue to play its advocacy role in fostering university-industry linkages across the continent and beyond, and also create the appropriate platforms for continuous dialogue and dissemination of information on the topic.

DEVELOPMENT CHALLENGES FOR AFRICAN UNIVERSITIES

All over the world, higher education institutions (HEIs), particularly universities, are being touted and positioned as strategic assets in innovation and problem-solvers of socio-economic challenges. However, African HEIs face many challenges in reorienting their institutions to play pivotal roles in these directions. Some of these known challenges are listed below.

Resource constraints and decreased government funding

The term *resource* can to be considered from various angles. The human resource is top on the list. Here is probably the most problematic challenge area for the development of higher education in Africa. Recruitment of senior academics by international research institutions is draining the senior academia resource pool in Africa. These academics (capable of supervising graduate work and leading research teams) are therefore in short supply, while the best graduates are seeking fulfilment outside academics. Consequently, the number of PhDs among academic staff is fast dwindling.

The issue of underfunding of universities in Africa is also well known. *Government funding* has been the subject of progressive degradation, while internally generated revenue (IGR) explored by many universities in Africa are yet to add substantially to the resources of these universities.

Likewise, the growth in the number of institutions, in the number of enrolled students, and in the spread of programmes, and in private higher education provision has expanded access to higher education but at the expense of quality of provision.

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(1) *Developing External Partnerships as Viable Resource Supplements for Universities*

The development challenges of universities far outweigh the resources available to them. Partnerships with institutions and partners outside their physical campuses would be one sure way of addressing this challenge. Thus, the university (by opening its doors to outside institutions) would have the opportunity of exposing its ideas, products and services to the outside world of socio-economic operators. The outside world would in turn expose its own ways and means to the University.

External Partnerships can be considered mutually beneficial relationships that involve a wide variety of organisations, institutions and agencies. Such partnerships can exist at different operational scales in the 'world out there' and should be considered an elastic concept, as demonstrated by the following examples:

- **Socio-cultural organisations** promoting languages and cultures of specific groups in society (sources of enrichment/social laboratory of university curricula in the performing arts, linguistics, cultural studies, traditional religion, etc.). These organisations can also be helped to 'modernise their methods of work by the injection of ideas from university researchers. The end result is enhanced social relevance of teaching and research in the university and enhanced representation of socio-cultural organisations in higher education research activities.
- **Local NGOs** that pursue development activities in the socio-economic domain. Creating mechanisms for the sharing of local knowledge and ideas and products between the university and such NGOs would be of benefit to both sides, especially if the university can show the relevance of its work in a variety of disciplines to the pursuit of the ideals of the NGO partner.
- **Micro-businesses:** small enterprises in the informal sector ranging from commercial/retail outlets, transport services, small-scale construction /manufacturing, and urban agriculture. Such micro-businesses in the informal sector provide employment and income for the majority of the population (particularly urban dwellers) in many African countries. However, the informal sector has not been properly integrated in the formal economy and in the urban management and physical planning systems. To address financial input, technological, and infrastructural constraints, universities can help in organising such self-employed persons into associations, and assist in empowering them in technical and managerial skills. At the same time, universities would be tapping into the tacit knowledge of this valuable group to enrich community-based participatory research opportunities that are relevant in a university's sphere of influence.
- **Small-scale Businesses:** This is a potential source of wealth creation and employment generation in Africa. They are increasingly attracting the attention of graduates of higher education institutions, and their activities cover all areas of academic activities of universities - the humanities, the natural sciences, the applied science, technological and management disciplines. Bringing the university closer to such businesses would be

mutually enriching: the university would be tapping on the creativity of the small scale entrepreneur, while the entrepreneurs would be tapping on research-generated ideas for the improvement of their businesses.

- **Big business:** This is the organised private sector seen in manufacturing, services, construction, shipping, air and land travel, mining, petroleum, publishing (books, newspapers, magazines) insurance, distribution/logistics, financial/banking services, and ICT. They are dominant in terms of financial power. They need the universities for manpower (graduates for employment for their operations), and research-generated knowledge (to drive their competitiveness in a knowledge economy). Universities also need such businesses for *ideas* (since big businesses are innovators in best practices and efficiency), *technical facilities* (since some of them are better endowed than universities in these matters), *funds* (since most of them are interested in university products that can contribute to enhancing their profits and in the pursuit of their ideals of corporate social responsibility), and as *centres for the absorption of human capital output* that is generated by universities.
- **National governments** are the proprietors of state-owned universities. Most of them spend a fortune seeking answers to development challenges elsewhere. The time has come for them to challenge their own universities by associating them closely with development efforts. This would have the great advantage of building up expertise in the universities and keeping the knowledge and expertise generated in-country.
- **International Development and Research Partners**, made up of (a) agencies of the United Nations, (b) multilateral development partners, (c) foundations, and (d) bilateral partners, including international universities. This group constitutes a vast unexplored and under-exploited territory for universities.
- **National and multinational professional associations** that represent the interests and promote the development of specific professions in different jurisdictions. Such professional associations can be broadly focused on professional education, such as the African Association of Planning Schools, or mandated to monitor professional practice and membership at the national scale, such as the Surveyors Institute of Malawi. Professional associations have a vested interest in individual programmes of study within their jurisdiction and would benefit from university partnerships to support the expansion of their student membership and the sustainability of their professional role in society. Institutions of higher education of all sizes can also benefit from partnerships with professional associations; the emphasis on fostering “professionalism” and community service within the university culture can lead to employability benefits for graduates and can raise the profile of the university at large. Integrating the activities of these specialty professional associations into the systemic processes of university outreach and pedagogy planning is a significant opportunity to improve stakeholder relations.

The benefits of external partnerships to universities is thus not simply funding (important as this is). They are also in the realm of universities contributing to the development of society (civil society, government, businesses), universities understanding the society they are intended to serve, universities being better understood and accepted by the wider society, and universities actively enhancing their social relevance in teaching, research and public service functions.

(2) Managing the External Partnership Process

Long-term sustainability and continuously strengthening of external partnerships would depend on universities leading with the following actions:

- a. Developing institutional policy on external partnerships, as an expression of the vision and mission of the university, shared by all academic/administrative/technical staff.
- b. Sustaining an advisory committee with representatives of various units of the University, possibly with a few outside members.
- c. Building a mechanism (a unit under the direct supervision of the head of the university) and associated mechanisms at the faculty level) for the day-to-day operations of external partnerships.
- d. Dedication to the implementation of the external partnership policy, and a vigorous strategic planning process to facilitate regular university-partner dialogues and the collection of public information.

To support the long-term sustainability of external partnership management by its university members, the AAU will continue to play its advocacy role in fostering university-industry linkages across the continent with the aim of having universities graduate students fit for the world of work. It will create the platform for dialogue and disseminate information on the topic through workshops, conferences and other news media.

RECOMMENDED READING AVAILABLE ON AAU.ORG

African Association of Universities & Association of Universities and Colleges of Canada (ed. Obanya, Pai). (2012). *Giving Your University a Strategic Focus: A Practical Guide to Institutional Strategic Planning*.

African Association of Universities & Association of Universities and Colleges of Canada (ed. Obanya, Pai). (2012). *Training Module on Institutional Strategic Planning: Modules 1*.



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