Building Research Capacity in Higher Education Institutes through Partnerships with African Universities

Higher Education and Why It Is Important
For decades higher education has been sidelined as a potential contributor to development, in favour of the historical pro-poor education agenda envisaged through attainment of Universal primary Education. There is a growing recognition that Africa’s future rests with the development of its intellectual capital through strong higher education systems and development of locally applicable research and innovation structures, not just with the development of basic education. The Programme of Strategic co-operation (PSC) represents a departure from this historical viewpoint and with it recognition of the need for higher educational expansion associated with democratization, public policy reform, and increasing participation of civil society in shaping the future of African countries.

Building Research Capacity in Higher Education Institutes through Partnerships with African Universities
In 2006, Irish Aid and the Higher Education Authority (HEA) launched the “Programme of Strategic Cooperation (PSC) between Irish Aid and Higher Education and Research Institutes 2007-2011”, for the purposes of capacity strengthening of Southern HEIs in key poverty related thematic areas. This represented acceptance of the importance of capacity building as a mechanism to implement collaborative higher education strategies and was a further reflection of the White Paper on Irish Aid (2006).

Doctoral Training for Development in Africa and the North South Experience
Through the support of the PSC, TCD initiated the Doctoral Training for Development in Africa Programme. Operating as a newly established partnership network the programme strengthened Higher education in and for Africa through the creation of 15 TCD associated PhD studentships across African, European and North American Universities, research and education consortia. The programme also strengthened the capacity of Irish HEIs to engage in development related activities through creation of an enabling platform the Trinity International Development Initiative (TIDI) for education, dissemination and outreach activities. The PhDs address research questions generated by Southern partners across the disciplines of natural science, health, and economics, specifically aiming to train high quality researchers and build research and teaching capacity in African institutions. The areas of study were coherent with Irish Aid thematic priorities. It was clear that the quality of partnership would be a critical determinant of the value of outcomes achieved however; little evidence existed on the characteristics of quality partnership. Three partnership models were employed by this programme:

- **Bilateral** – The partnership between and Makerere University (Environment and Natural Sciences) is based on a traditional model of support in research and teaching between TCD and MUIENR.
- **Multilateral** – The International Doctorate in Global Health (Indigo) includes partners in TCD, Columbia University, Harvard Medical School and the Queen’s University Belfast, Addis Ababa (Ethiopia), Ibadan (Nigeria), Makerere (Uganda) and College of Medicine (Malawi), South Africa’s Human Sciences Research Council’s (HSRC) Social Aspects of HIV/AIDS & Health (SAHA) group and the Council on Health Research for Development (COHRED), based in Geneva. This delivers a multidisciplinary approach to PhD training with students from diverse backgrounds able to study at leading Universities and to conduct research in Africa with an International panel of supervisors.

Findings on Report on North South Experiences of Doctoral Training for Development in Africa

To investigate the nature of partnership - its impact on African and Irish institutions, and its role in building intellectual capital that can address problems specific to Africa, TCD conducted research that would enable a greater understanding of North-South Experiences of Doctoral Training through compilation of specific SWOT analyses, and recommendations from each of the partnership models.

**Capacity Strengthening**

**Bilateral Model Strengths**
- Equitable partnership with parity of esteem and shared research priorities
- Good supervision model
- Student Centred
- Cost effective

**Multilateral Model Strengths**
- Innovative programme design and structure
- Collaborative, International inter-disciplinary and contextual
- Institutional capacity strengthening

Specific strengths of the **African-led model** include its link to...
policy makers in Africa, its collaborative and dynamic nature and cost effectiveness. Other strengths included the potential to retain highly trained students in Africa and development of a strong partnership structure between TCD and AERC. Weaknesses include the limited nature of the partnership (restricted to economics) and lack of direct access by AERC to the programme funder.

“\textbf{The total number of applications (sic PhD training) we get on an annual basis is in excess of eighty per year, and with our limited resources we can support maximum thirty. So there is a huge unmet demand}”

Table 1: Excerpt from research piece “A Report on North South Experiences of Doctoral Training for Development in Africa”

The strengths of the \textbf{bilateral partnership} are that it is cost effective, student-centered and results in equitable partnership between supervisors with shared common research priorities and interests. However, in the context of limited capacity to scale-up, the administrative and financial costs involved in creating a programme for small numbers of students is excessive.

“One person can only contribute so much to the existing capacity so if there is opportunity in the future to train more people under the same programme that’d be great. Then you would see a much bigger impact on the college ...”

Table 2: Excerpt from research

The strengths of the \textbf{multilateral partnership model} were the collaborative and interdisciplinary nature of the programme, its ability to encourage research within the student’s context and its support for capacity strengthening of students, supervisors and institutions. In addition the input from leading Universities and internationally renowned supervisors was innovative. Programme weaknesses include difficulties in establishing and maintaining good communication and effective working relationships between supervisors in different parts of the world and the expensive nature of the programme.

“\textbf{Strength is capacity building, especially in health, especially for Makerere and the School of Psychology, of which I am the Dean. We are bottom heavy, I think 70\% of our staff are all teaching assistant lecturers and we don’t have senior staff members and you cannot be senior staff without a PhD so we see this research as a very great opportunity to train our staff}.”

Table 3: Excerpt from research

\textbf{Key Recommendations}

\textbf{Creation of strong Higher education systems represents an indispensable contribution to long term social and economic development, governance and peace in Africa. PSC funding for Doctoral Training for Development in Africa created a partnership network that highlighted the important role of development assistance for higher education as a mechanism to combat problems specific to Africa.}

\textbullet Research collaborations and partnerships between Northern and Southern HEIs are strengthened by programmes such as the PSC and should become a core part of Irish aid policy and research strategy.

\textbullet Such partnerships can become an enabling mechanism through which Irish Aid can generate and access research that supports their mission to achieve poverty reduction.

\textbf{African-led Model Recommendations}

\textbullet AERC is a sub-regional organization which covers most of sub-Saharan Africa; it is recommended that Irish Aid identify AERC as one of its working partners with a capacity to develop an agenda for Irish Aid which takes into account AERC expertise and knowledge of the African economic context.

\textbullet Irish Aid should consider governance indicators such as the AERC Voluntary Code of Conduct and standard operating procedures for reporting as a benchmark of the potential quality of partnership with such groups.

\textbf{Bilateral Model Recommendations}

\textbullet The traditional nature of this type of partnership makes it easy to sponsor and scale-up because it is applicable across a wide range of institutions and disciplines.

\textbullet Additional impact would be gained by supporting thematic areas and skills that need to be strengthened and supported within specific institutions and contexts.

\textbullet The added dimension of multi-disciplinarity should be encouraged within Southern institutions using this model of doctoral training, to maximize value in addressing research challenges.

\textbullet Both the partnerships and its impact would be strengthened by promotion and awarding of joint degrees between collaborating Universities (North and South).

\textbf{Multilateral Model Recommendations}

\textbullet For multilateral programmes a strong communication strategy is essential from the outset, and should be part of the decision to support such programmes. Simple interventions such as an annual or biannual newsletter describing students, supervisors, partners and networks should be considered as standard.

\textbullet Decision making, regardless of sponsorship source, must largely be collective. Policy and programme content and direction must be adaptable, thus governance structures (North and South) must be flexible to take account of this.

\textbullet It may be necessary for the programme to consolidate the research themes to make the output of the programme more coherent and to align it with institutional and regional priorities for research.

\textbullet South–South collaboration is fundamental to African participation in multilateral programmes and should be promoted.

\textbullet Partnerships and impact would be strengthened by promotion and awarding of joint degrees between North-South collaborating Universities.

The partnerships created and strengthened through this process represent both a belief in the importance and viability of higher education to social and economic development in Africa and a mechanism to provide meaningful assistance to its revitalization, leading African Universities to become a source of innovation, training, scholarship and intellectual capital for societal development.

To view the full report on North South Experiences of Doctoral Training for Development in Africa visit \textit{here or visit \url{www.tcd.ie/tidi}}