

US-AFRICA: University partnerships for development

Alison Moodie

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A number of ambitious US-led initiatives are helping to reinvigorate African higher education, said delegates at the annual Association of International Education Administrators **conference** in San Francisco. Funded in large part by the US government, they seek to strengthen and develop African universities through partnerships with US institutions.

A lack of sufficient investment by national governments and international donors, as well as the struggle of universities in Africa to adapt to a changing economic environment and an increasingly globalised world, has weakened the continent's educational infrastructure.

"Higher education partnerships and the role of higher education development in Africa has been sorely neglected in the past few decades," said David Hansen, a senior fellow at the Association of Public and Land Grant Universities (APLU).

The APLU, a non-profit association of public research universities, spearheads the African-US Higher Education Initiative, which aims to foster long term partnerships between US and African universities and to increase awareness of the vital role universities play in the continent's social and economic development.

Since its inception in 2007, the initiative has awarded 33 planning grants of \$50,000 and 11 partnership grants of \$1.1 million to US and African universities.

Each of the 11 partnerships developed a five-year strategic plan, including a long-term vision of how they plan to contribute to the African country's human and socio-economic development by concentrating their efforts on one focus area.

The 11 recipients include partnerships between Addis Ababa University in Ethiopia and the University of Connecticut, with a focus on water resources management, the University of Malawi and Michigan State University, with a focus area on natural resources, and the University of Cape Town and the University of Cincinnati, focusing on energy-solar power.

A knowledge centre is in the process of being established that will look at the link between higher education and socio-economic development, will evaluate what works and what doesn't in university partnerships, and engage in research to support advocacy efforts and policy recommendations.

The initiative came about in 2007 after a meeting between a number of groups based in the US and Africa.

"The Africans were decrying the fact that there was a lack of investment in higher education in Africa," said Hansen. "How were they going to respond to the needs that have been evidenced in their societies?"

African higher education is facing serious challenges, among them a rapidly burgeoning student population, dilapidated infrastructure, a lack of qualified staff, and the toll of HIV-Aids.

Collaborating with APLU is Higher Education for Development (HED), a USAID-funded organisation. Along with helping manage the US-Africa Higher Education Initiative, HED is also fostering other partnerships between US and African tertiary institutions.

A third of its 300 partnerships worldwide are with African universities. An example is a partnership between South Carolina State University and Ngozi University in Burundi aimed at strengthening rural agriculture development. With the help of a \$450 000 grant, the partnership has established the first ever agri-business programme in the East African nation.

Another project overseen by HED is the Leadership Initiative for Public Health in East Africa, which aims to better train public health leaders in Uganda and Tanzania. Over six years, the initiative has grown to include six countries and 8 higher education institutions, including Muhimbili University College of Health Sciences in Tanzania, Johns Hopkins and George Washington University. The initiative has helped with curriculum development, staff training and improving infrastructure at East African universities.

Tully Cornick, executive director of HED, said a good partnership characteristic is the ability to evolve over time, with the African country taking the lead. "We need more African-led collaborations involving multiple institutions and countries. The host country must be part of the process in determining the partnership activities and outcomes."

Cornick said one of the biggest challenges of partnerships is demonstrating that money invested in universityworldnews.com/article.php?...

higher education translates into development improvement across the board.

"As I look at the ongoing dialogue in the States about higher education, this argument of dollars invested in higher education and its developmental impact is critically important. As a consequence, we collectively have been and will be further held accountable for the kind of development impact that we have."

The non-profit EducationUSA Reconnect-Plus, run by the College Board, is a programme aimed at promoting US university study to students abroad. The organisation has so far sent six delegations to countries "off the beaten path, where US universities and colleges have not had the capacity to go on their own," said the College Board's Janine Farhat.

A team traveled to Nigeria in October last year, visiting a number of universities in Lagos and Abuja. The goal was to encourage study in the US, and also to establish links with Nigerian tertiary institutions for academic programmes, research, staff development and study abroad for US students.

The Nigerian universities "are really eager, almost desperate, for assistance," said Farhat. The College Board team led workshops for students, families and educators to explain the US admission process, campus life and academic opportunities at undergraduate and graduate levels.

"I'm very optimistic of where things are going in Nigeria," said Farhat, "especially university administrators' views of what they need to do to turn their institutions around."