

AFRICA: University support funds under-used

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Association of African Universities Acting President, Professor George Magoha, has urged universities to exploit funds and opportunities that the association offers for teaching and development. The AAU has money for staff exchange and ICT training that is being wasted.

Opening the association's biennial conference at Stellenbosch University in South Africa, Magoha said that although the AAU did not have solutions to every problem of individual universities, there were simply not enough takers for the resources available.

"We have more than 600 universities on the continent and 242 are members. That's where the problem starts, lack of interest among universities. We struggle to get people on board from different regions of Africa," he said.

The Conference of Rectors, Vice-chancellors and Presidents of African Universities, or COREViP 2011, ran from 30 May to 3 June under the theme, "Strengthening the Space of Higher Education in Africa". The last meeting was held in Abuja, Nigeria, in 2009.

"If you ask universities to join, they say 'what's in it for me?' When you tell them they don't respond," he told *University World News*.

He said some African university leaders were quick to condemn the AAU as useless, yet they were not bringing their support and ideas to the organisation.

"We have grants for thesis and dissertation supervision but rarely people ask about it," he said, adding that this lack of interest was contributing to African higher education's problem of churning out masters graduates, but not nearly enough of them advancing to PhD study.

He called on the African Union to commit funds to doctoral study on the continent, which would help to tackle a severe high-level skills crisis and could help the visibility of smaller universities.

Professor Russel Botman, Rector and Vice-chancellor of Stellenbosch University, pointed out that Africa produced only 0.7% of the world's scientific research. "Clearly we are not doing enough to come up with home-grown solutions to our problems in Africa," he said.

Another area with underused funding was staff exchanges of between three to six months within Africa, said Magoha, a Kenyan neurologist who calls himself "a human plumber".

"The AAU has money for library training but it is not being fully used. There is need for modern libraries among our universities," he added. "We also have support for regional consortia of universities to negotiate cheaper internet bandwidth."

Magoha said funds and other opportunities offered by AAU were publicised through letters to members as well as on the organisation's website. "If you are a vice-chancellor and you cannot use the internet, you have no reason to be in that office."

He said the conference would be used to spread the AAU word, and to lobby universities not represented and tell them about the benefits of being members.

For years the AAU has grappled with the problem of universities becoming members but not paying their dues, and this issue continues. "Some governments think they still support the AAU through African Union but this is not the case," he said.

Despite the questionable credentials of Libya's besieged leader Muammar Gaddafi, Magoha said Libyan universities had always honoured their dues through their government. And some countries such as Ghana where the AAU is based, have been highly supportive. But this is not the norm.

Magoha said his vision as acting president was to maintain the mandate of the AAU as the representative voice of African higher education in and outside the continent.

The body also strives to advocate recognition of the role of higher in Africa's development, and is working to strengthen efforts to provide quality education that produces individuals trained to meet the demands of African commerce and industry.

The new AAU Secretary General, Professor Olugbemiro Jegede, said that while education was the key to the future and high education was a path to it, merely attaining education was not the goal. Higher education must also solve Africa's many challenges.

Comment:

The claim that African scholars do not request the funding meant for the development of higher education in Africa exposes the flaws of the Association of African Universities (AAU) in matching policies with realities.

I am an African scholar and I am not aware of such funding, despite being a member of several professional associations such as the Council for the Development of Social Research in Africa, the Global Development Network, the International Sociological Association, and the Nigerian Young Academy, among others.

I know that my colleagues in other disciplines also maintain active professional networks. Why would African researchers shun funds for the development of postgraduate research? The AAU's claim appears spurious given the fact that inadequate funding is a key problem in the African research environment. The AAU should stop politicising African academe.

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