
AFRICA: AAU 12th general conference begins

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Hundreds of African and international higher education leaders are gathering in Abuja, Nigeria, today for the 12th General Conference of the Association of African Universities. The theme of this major event from 4-9 May is "Sustainable Development in Africa: The role of higher education".

The conference, hosted by the University of Abuja and the University of Ilorin, is being held at the Abuja International Conference Centre and will be opened tomorrow by Nigerian President Umaru Musa Yar'adua, himself a former academic.

New leaders of the Association of African Universities (AAU) will be elected, to support Secretary-General Professor Goolam Mohamedbhai and his secretariat based in Accra, Ghana. A new president will replace Professor Njabulo Ndebele, former vice-chancellor of the University of Cape Town, and a new vice-president and executive board will be chosen.

Dozens of speakers will interrogate four sub-themes of the general "Sustainable Development in Africa: The role of higher education" theme: teaching and learning; research and development; engaging the community; and greening the campus."

In a concept paper to guide the conference, the AAU points out that more than any other region Africa is "unprotected and at risk of being exploited without due recognition and remuneration of its resources". Africa's sustainability problems hinge on "threats to food security, poverty, disease, land degradation, water security, climate change, conflicts, deforestation, natural disasters and urbanisation".

The key role of education in achieving sustainable development has been highlighted since the 1992 UN Conference on Environment and Development in Rio. There, 41 African nations endorsed Agenda 21, the international programme for sustainable development. In 2002 the UN declared 2005-2014 the Decade of Education for Sustainable Development (UN DESD).

"UN DESD offers a strategic guide to the African higher education community to review its curricula, set and undertake relevant scientific research, forge partnerships and set practical examples towards ensuring social, economic, environmental and overall inter-generational equity within the concept of the Millennium Development Goals and the African development agenda," the concept paper points out.

Higher education, it continues, has a critical role to play in conducting the scholarship and research necessary to generate new knowledge needed, and to train the leaders and teachers of tomorrow in the complexities of sustainable development.

"Within the ambit of sustainable development, African higher education institutions are provided with the tools to redesign their educational structures to provide answers to the environmental and developmental challenges confronting the continent."

Regarding teaching and learning, the paper argues that it is necessary to re-orient university programmes - in the pure and applied sciences, social science and humanities - and to introduce new teaching approaches and methods, support and activities that respond to the challenges of education for sustainable development.

"Lifelong learning is equally important for Africa, and higher education institutions are expected to mount appropriate programmes for training key professionals such as engineers, architects, economists etc in relevant aspects of sustainable development."

In terms of research and development, universities need to help tackle challenges in Africa - primarily those of promoting economic and industrial development, eradicating poverty, resolving conflicts and optimising the use of the continent's natural resources.

"Because of the 'publish or perish' syndrome, the African higher education research agenda tends to focus on purely academic and scientific objectives, to ensure publication in refereed journals, with little regard to developmental needs," says the concept paper.

Consequently, the results of research are rarely relevant to the search for solutions to Africa's problems - and even when research is relevant to sustainable development "findings have remained largely on shelves and unavailable to those who need to take action or implement the often useful recommendations".

Scientific and technological methods and innovative approaches "are essential in guiding the setting of the African research and development agenda", the paper continues. Collaboration, including university-industry-government links, could help to direct research and optimise use of resources, along with other forms of collaboration that work to stem the brain drain and encourage involvement of the African Diaspora in tackling the continent's challenges.

Opportunities abound in Africa for higher education institutions to engage with and serve their communities, the concept paper says. Limited state funding and other constraints are encouraging institutions to

undertake extension activities such as consultancies and units, and to provide incentives for staff to undertake development-oriented societal activities.

Through talks and seminars and the dissemination of research results, higher education should sensitise the public about sustainable development issues. Universities should also tap the potentially huge role students can play in identifying development problems that can be solved by institutions and then devolved back to the community, and assist the large numbers of non-governmental organisations involved in community service.

While there had been efforts by some institutions to 'green' their campuses, they are not monitored or coordinated in Africa as they are, for instance, in North America.

"To be effective in preaching sustainable development, higher education institutions in Africa must practice it in all their day-to-day activities on campus. They should introduce energy saving measures, encourage a reduction in the use of paper and other materials, recycle their waste products wherever possible and, generally, help to create a clean, pleasant, healthy and safe campus environment conducive to teaching and learning for both staff and students."

To achieve these goals, institutions must encourage staff and students to participate fully in the process. Finally, says the paper, "governance and management practices at all levels must be consultative, participatory, fair, transparent and accountable."