Africa Attracts Renewed Attention From American Universities

The focus is on long-term partnerships that support African universities

By KARIN FISCHER and MEGAN LINDOW

After decades of neglect, African universities have become the focus of intense interest by U.S. universities, foundations, and donor agencies convinced that without stronger higher education, the continent's development prospects will remain bleak.

This attention is notably different from such efforts in the past in sub-Saharan Africa, which have often been limited in scope and, many say, reflected American, not African, priorities. American universities and other partners say they are determined to build long-term relationships that will allow African universities to guide their nations in this century, in much the same way Asian universities helped fuel phenomenal regional growth in the 1990s.

"It's an issue whose time has come," says M. Peter McPherson, president of the National Association of State Universities and Land-Grant Colleges. "We're not pushing against a wall — there's an open door of excitement."

The association is leading one of the most ambitious efforts. Along with several other educational and humanitarian groups, its members are looking at ways to build collaborations of a decade or more between U.S. and African colleges.

The partnerships, which could involve multiple institutions, would focus on critical fields such as agriculture, health care, and teacher training. They would also seek to strengthen the African collaborators in areas like institutional management, fund-raising capacity, and faculty and curriculum development.

Already, the U.S. Agency for International Development has announced that it will provide $1-million for 20 grants of $50,000 apiece to begin planning partnerships. And more than 130 senior international officers from U.S. research universities and other institutions are meeting this week in New Hampshire to talk about how best to build long-term collaborations.

African university leaders and other higher-education experts say they are eager for such partnerships to develop, provided that they are true collaborations.

Damtew Teferra, director for Africa and the Middle East of the Ford Foundation International Fellowships Program, says the relationships must be structured to respond to African universities' needs, not American preconceptions of what is necessary.
"How much will Africans be involved?" asks Mr. Teferra, who also established and leads the International Network for Higher Education in Africa. "Who puts down the rules of the game?"

Cost could also be a stumbling block. The state-university association has estimated that sustaining a single, broad-based partnership would require between $1-million and $3-million annually.

And, in the end, it's unclear how much difference such efforts can make, given the magnitude of the challenges that face Africa.

"There are very large gaps," says Roy Steiner, deputy director of agricultural development for the Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation, which is heavily involved in African development. "There's a real recognition that we'll only be able to solve a small part of Africa's problems."

Even so, senior officials at African universities say that the most effective partnerships they're involved in have already helped to transform their institutions in ways both large and small.

"Part of the growth we have is a direct result of these partnerships," says Makenya A.H. Maboko, deputy vice chancellor in charge of academics and research at the University of Dar es Salaam, in Tanzania, citing what he says is now one of the best information-and-communications-technology infrastructures in the region.

A State of Disrepair

Africa is the only continent to see poverty rise and average incomes shrink over the last two decades, in part because its universities are not up to the task of educating the necessary cadres of professionals. During the same period, Asian countries, which pumped billions of dollars into higher education, experienced rapid economic expansion.

In Africa, however, the World Bank advised national governments to shift funds away from higher education and toward primary and secondary education in the 1980s and 90s, arguing that fighting poverty required basic skills, not Ph.D.'s.

That view has begun to change. Today the World Bank, governments, and other groups say they recognize the role universities play in contributing to economic development. But inattention has left African universities ill equipped.

Over the years, many of the best African students and scholars have left for American or European universities, and poor salaries have driven others into the private sector.

The result of this brain drain is that across disciplines, on average, just 70 percent of African faculty posts are filled, according to the African Network of Scientific and Technological Institutions.

At the University of Dar es Salaam, one of the continent's top institutions, more than half the staff members in some departments are teaching assistants or assistant lecturers with only a master's degree.

Staffing problems have also meant that university curricula are often irrelevant to work-force needs. College leaders struggle with the complex management demands of modern institutions. The dearth of computers, poorly stocked libraries, sporadic Internet connectivity, and the high cost of bandwidth conspire to further isolate African universities.

Meanwhile, the demand for a college education has exploded across the continent. Between 1985 and 2005, higher-education enrollments in sub-Saharan Africa quadrupled, to more than 3.4 million, the fastest rate of increase in the world. Universities have had little choice but to cram ever-larger numbers of students into overcrowded classrooms and dormitories while spreading meager resources even thinner.
An Ad Hoc Approach

Relationships between American and African institutions have plugged a few of the gaps. African educators say they value those partnerships and that even seemingly small acts, such as being able to co-author an international research paper — can have a profound impact.

Still, most partnerships have been limited in scope, often formed on an ad hoc basis between individual researchers or departments.

One reason is that foreign financial support for development projects is often small, short term, and from disparate sources. American universities may get a grant from the U.S. Department of Agriculture, for example, that can be used to conduct crop research abroad, or funds from the Education Department to cooperate with a foreign institution on the development of international-business courses.

One key supporter of international partnerships is Higher Education for Development, a Washington-based association of higher-education organizations that sponsors projects run jointly by higher-education institutions in the United States and abroad. Since 1998, the group has handed out $21.3-million in grants, which are financed by the U.S. Agency for International Development, for 93 projects in sub-Saharan Africa.

College officials and others say current sources of support, like the HED grants, which average about $300,000 over three years, are simply not enough.

When the money isn't there, "you end up doing things on the margins," says Jack Bermingham, president of Highline Community College in Washington State, which has received HED grants for its work in Namibia and South Africa. "It's not institutional, it's not transformative."

With limited resources, sustaining partnerships take creativity. At Highline, for example, administrators have set aside a portion of tuition revenue from its growing foreign-student population to help support the college's overseas partnerships, including one with the Polytechnic of Namibia to create a curriculum for training entrepreneurs and establish a center for developing new methods for teaching and retaining underprepared students.

West Virginia University underwrites faculty and student travel to its partner institutions, Moi University, in Kenya, and the Catholic University of Mozambique, and encourages retired professors or those on sabbatical to work on its projects in community health and flood-plain mapping there.

Short-term efforts may not have lasting effects, however, because they do not respond to African universities' most pressing needs but rather reflect limits set out by donors or American researchers' priorities, says Jo Ivey Boufford, president of the New York Academy of Medicine and a professor of public service, health policy, and management at New York University School of Medicine.

African universities may hesitate to say no to any outside support, but after those funds dry up, they may be less likely to commit their own resources to a project not regarded as an institutional priority.

"Some universities, particularly in poorer countries, can end up developing relationships with every Tom, Dick, and Harry," says Dr. Boufford, who has long been involved in international health-care work and served for four years as the U.S. representative to the World Health Organization. "It's been fairly unsatisfactory." Further complications arise when institutions are involved in multiple programs and must juggle the various needs and language demands of partners from different countries.

Stronger Advocates

Some African educators say they are becoming stronger advocates for their institutions' needs.
"Ten years ago, cooperation was much more based on individual faculties and departments," says Mr. Maboko, of the University of Dar es Salaam. "The university could not target support for the most needy areas, so the opportunity to prioritize was lost." Today, he says, his university works to ensure that such projects can be kept going. For example, the university plans to expand its communications networks to offer distance learning in other parts of the country, he says.

"The African institution must fully own the programs, and not be left feeling that the programs are an imposition with minimum input from their side," says John Ssebuwufu, director of research and programs at the Association of African Universities, in Ghana.

To that end, African and American university administrators say they want to create partnerships that build African institutions' ability to tackle the continent's most pressing needs, such as training health-care workers to care for those sick with AIDS or strengthening local agricultural research to combat food shortages. One of the most critical needs is for better training of African graduate students and academics within these partnerships, African educators say.

There is also widespread agreement that any collaboration should buttress African universities as a whole.

The most profound example of that to date has been the Partnership for Higher Education in Africa, in which seven major American foundations have pledged $350-million since 2000 to strengthen select universities in nine African countries. They have focused on expanding Internet access, developing regional networks to share research and training capacity, and preparing senior administrators to improve university management.

The foundations hope that by building up certain institutions, they can "demonstrate vitality" and create models for institutional development elsewhere on the continent, says Vartan Gregorian, president of the Carnegie Corporation of New York, one of the donors.

**Model Programs**

A few U.S. universities have already developed projects that are seen as models.

In Botswana, the University of Pennsylvania turned a short-term commitment to train local medical professionals to treat HIV and AIDS into a long-term partnership that has helped build the country's first medical school.

Without a medical school of its own, Botswana was sending students abroad for training as doctors and nurses. But many never returned.

Working with Penn and other international partners, the University of Botswana continued to send its students abroad as the medical school was being built, then brought them back to its own hospitals where students and faculty members from Penn supervised internships and residencies.

Next year the medical school — whose internal-medicine curriculum was designed by Penn physicians — will be ready to accept the first class of students who will be able to complete their entire training in Botswana.

The partnership with Penn has helped in other ways, too. Most recently, researchers in the partnership won a $12-million grant from the U.S. National Institutes of Health to develop the University of Botswana's ability to conduct AIDS research.

The project has even grown beyond medicine, with Penn sending students and faculty members from its business, communications, law, and veterinary schools to Botswana for internships and research opportunities. There are also plans this year for one of the University of Botswana's financial officers to
travel to Penn to study how the university manages its finances.

"It's very important that these visits back and forth help to reduce the isolation of our staff," says John Holm, director of the office of international education and partnerships at the University of Botswana.

Cornell University's involvement in Ethiopia has also drawn much interest. Situated on Lake Tana, the source of the Blue Nile, in the remote, impoverished northwestern highlands of Ethiopia, Bahir Dar University has had little contact with the outside world. Then a watershed-management project in which the Cornell engineer Tammo Steenhuis was involved brought in a $150,000 grant from the World Bank to the Ethiopian government to create a new master's-degree program in water management.

Cornell's faculty had the needed expertise. The program began last November with 20 Ethiopian students and a rotation of Cornell faculty members flying in for three-week teaching stints. In the next couple of years, as Bahir Dar faculty works with Cornell professors to take over the instruction, the management of the program will be transferred over to Bahir Dar, says Alice Pell, vice provost for international relations at Cornell.

Challenges Ahead

During the months the Bahir Dar program has been operating, challenges have surfaced. Financing has been a problem — initially, some students ended up without enough money for living expenses. Power outages are frequent, and books, computers, and other amenities are in short supply.

Far harder tests lie ahead as universities strive to create meaningful partnerships with limited resources, often in places where poverty and instability are rife.

A key is simply to find the money. Although the seven foundations have stepped forward to invest in universities, other donor groups have been more cautious about shifting resources to higher education. The Gates foundation, for example, has given $100,000 to the state-university association to support the grant-making process, but has yet to make a broader commitment to revitalizing higher education.

Mr. Steiner, the Gates official, says the foundation has to be convinced that each project it supports is the best way to deal with development challenges.

"We don't want to just create 100 Ph.D.'s without knowing how they are going to be useful to smallholder farmers," he says.

Legislation that would authorize $100-million for partnerships between African and American universities has been drafted by U.S. Rep. Donald M. Payne, a New Jersey Democrat who is chairman of House Committee on Foreign Affairs' Subcommittee on Africa and Global Health. But the bill has yet to be introduced, in part because potential sponsors have balked at the hefty price tag.

And USAID has made it clear that the $1-million it has set aside to help universities design long-term partnerships is all the agency will contribute at this point.

Sarah E. Moten, education-division chief for the agency's Africa Bureau, says it will be looking to see if partner universities have lined up potential sources of outside financing when it awards the planning grants.

"We need to see what the sustainability is upfront," Ms. Moten says.

Universities and donors must also decide whether to focus on partnerships with the better-equipped universities that can handle such collaborations or the less stable ones whose needs are actually greatest. Political strife is likely to make such relationships all but impossible in certain countries, like Zimbabwe.
And for some universities, infrastructure constraints can and frequently do prevent them from getting involved in partnerships in the first place.

The University of Education, in Winneba, Ghana, for instance, had to turn away a potential partnership with the Massachusetts Institute of Technology because the African university lacked the technological resources to participate, Jophus Anamuah-Mensah, a former vice chancellor there, says.

Despite the challenges, many educators say it is worth pressing ahead.

"We have to be humble and realistic — this is an area of the world whose problems have defied solutions," says David J. Skorton, president of Cornell. "But whatever impact we have is more than if we didn't try."