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Enhancing the relevance of universities in a changing world

The task of providing a sufficient quantity of healthy and nutritious food in a sustainable manner for rapidly expanding populations, especially in Africa, is daunting. Higher education organisations have a crucial role in meeting this challenge, working together with farmers, businesses, research organisations, civil society group and local and national governments. Universities in Africa will train the next generation of agriculturalists and equip them with the skills needed to operate effectively in a dynamic environment, responding to challenges and capitalising on emerging opportunities. Working

with other partners, they will contribute new knowledge that will enhance agricultural productivity and help to improve the livelihoods of farming households.

How ready are universities in Africa to rise to this challenge, given their current structures, resources and ways of working?

With limited resources at their disposal and large increases in student numbers at both undergraduate and postgraduate levels the majority of African universities concentrate most of their efforts on teaching. RUFORUM has made commendable efforts to support its member universities to revise curricula and adopt learning and teaching methods that prepare students for the workplace, whether in employment or self-employment. This is a continuing process and partnerships with universities and university networks in other regions of the world can add value.

One such partnership is with Agrinatura, an association of 35 universities and research organisations in 16 countries in Europe. In addition to formal collaboration on academic initiatives RUFORUM and Agrinatura benefit from an exchange of experiences from other initiatives. For example, Agrinatura has academic programmes with universities in Asia in which a range of mechanisms are used to enhance the practical knowledge and skills of students. These mechanisms include support to alumni centres, capacity strengthening of career centres and the establishment and facilitation of platforms for cooperation with the professional sector.

Many universities in Africa are now giving an increased priority to research and RUFORUM is assisting member universities to strengthen their research capacity in a variety of ways.

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Initiatives such as the African Higher Education Centres of Excellence programme supported by the World Bank are also making an important contribution to enhancing the quality of research. Are these significant developments leading to a change in the way that research is conducted? A common perception of research conducted by universities, not only in Africa, is that it has sometimes been too disconnected from the everyday problems people face in their daily lives. A narrow disciplinary-based approach with reward systems based largely on academic publications is still prevalent. In Europe most universities are evaluated on research excellence and teaching ranking, but in some countries research impact is now being given more weight than previously; for example, in the Research Excellence Framework in the United Kingdom in which resources are allocated to universities in relation to performance measured against pre-defined criteria.

Emerging trends in research and innovation in Europe

Policies and practices in universities in Europe are increasingly being influenced by the concept of open innovation. This is characterised by a move away from linear models of innovation to dynamic interaction between universities, business, civil society and other actors in what is being viewed in the new jargon as an innovation ecosystem. This reflects a growing recognition that innovation arises in multiple ways and that different actors may be involved, as exemplified by the process through which digital technologies often arise. Of course, farmers are also innovators and in the past insufficient attention has been paid to this important source of innovation in the agriculture sector. Universities in Europe are responding by orienting teaching and learning more strongly towards problem-based approaches and by doing more interdisciplinary research. Institutional changes may be required to work in this way. Stronger engagement with business means that support services have to be more professional when dealing with issues such as intellectual property and support to student start-ups and this can prove a challenge until suitable experience is gained.

There is also a trend in universities in Europe towards addressing grand challenges such as climate change and environmental pollution which reflect broad societal concerns. Some universities have even begun to organise their programmes around the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs). In this regard, it is interesting to note the recent Times Higher Education University Impact rankings which assess universities against selected SDGs with indicators for three broad areas: research, outreach, and stewardship. The first edition in 2019 includes more than 450 universities from 76 countries. The outcome of this initial exercise should probably be viewed with caution and there are those who question the value of any of the global rankings tables. However, it may be revealing that only one university in Africa was ranked in the top 100 places. The 2020 edition of the rankings will include more SDGs and it will be interesting to see whether universities in Africa feature more prominently.

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The re-emergence of the concept of the civic university

Many universities in Africa find it challenging to fulfil their outreach function. As with research, the low priority given to outreach reflects scarce resources. Organisational culture may also be a factor in the sense that outreach is not necessarily in the 'DNA' of some universities. Debates about the extent to which universities should engage with the wider public also take place in Europe. In some European universities the concept of the civic university is re-emerging as an organizational model. In this concept the traditional university is viewed as having teaching and research as core functions, with a hard boundary between third mission activities which are seen as peripheral. In the civic university there is a soft boundary between the more academic areas of teaching and research and the engagement with society through activities such as community work and support for local innovation.

One reason the concept of the civic university has gained ground during the past decade is that the tax-paying public, especially in areas of high unemployment, has been questioning the value of universities. The squeeze on public finances in the aftermath of the 2008 global financial crisis led some citizens to call for funds to be re-allocated from higher education to sectors that they considered to be more productive. Universities were under pressure to demonstrate their relevance to society and the adoption of the civic university model was a way of responding to this. Moreover, the changing view of innovation with its emphasis on cooperation between different types of actors has brought consumers, customers and citizens more directly into the frame. Finally, the growing demand for lifelong learning, whether for the acquisition of new skills for changing job requirements or simply for the personal interest of citizens, has had some influence.

Implications for African universities and RUFORUM

In the years ahead questions will continue to be asked about the role of universities and their wider contribution to society, in Africa as in other parts of the world. African universities should choose their own paths and develop models that are adapted to their local environments. Nevertheless, there are certain global trends such as the move towards more inter-disciplinary research that addresses key societal challenges which will accelerate. RUFORUM can add value by facilitating the sharing of experiences of doing such research among members and with universities from outside the continent.

About the Author

Dr Tim Chancellor is a specialist in capacity strengthening and works at the Natural Resources Institute (NRI), University of Greenwich. Tim has been involved for many years in Agrinatura, the European Alliance on Knowledge for Agricultural Development, and is currently its Vice-President. His early work was in sustainable crop pest and disease management and he had long-term assignments in Southeast Asia and sub-Saharan Africa. He was also involved in several research and consultancy activities in Latin America. He led NRI's Plant, Animal & Human Health Group from 2001 to 2006, when he was also an advisor to DFID's Crop Protection research programme. Since 2007 he has been coordinating NRI's work on capacity strengthening and partnership development. He has worked with RUFORUM on various initiatives including the Strengthening Capacity for Agricultural Research and Development in Africa project and the Platform for Africa-Europe Partnerships in Agricultural Research for Development. He has maintained his research interests in sustainable agricultural systems and from 2014-2017 he acted as Liaison Scientist for the McKnight Foundation's Collaborative Crop Research Program in southern Africa. He is interested in exploring ways to make agricultural information more relevant and more accessible to smallholder farmers, especially those located in remote areas.