



BUILDING BACK BETTER

A blueprint for an Africa-UK research partnership

May 2021

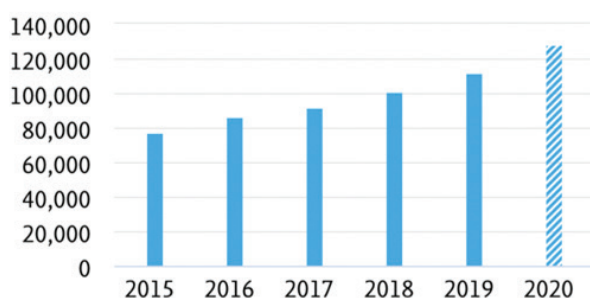
Africa is increasing its research profile. There are strong scientific, diplomatic, and aid reasons for the UK to maintain close partnerships. A recent Anglo-African seminar¹ discussed whether UK funding cuts could be an opportunity to build more sustainable links.

Overview

- The UK has been a partner of choice in Africa, but sudden withdrawal of funding has undermined trust.
- A new, government-led approach should combine project funding with support for ongoing relationships.
- Universities can contribute by developing and maintaining holistic African strategies.
- African governments can help by increasing research spend in line with past commitments.

The importance of African partnerships

Africa is bigger than China, the United States, and Europe combined – and will have the world’s largest workforce by 2040². Its contribution to global research is also increasing rapidly (Fig.1).



596,442

number of publications in Africa

▨ Incomplete year

Figure 1. Scholarly output in Africa

Credit: SciVal® database, Elsevier B.V.

<http://www.scival.com> (downloaded on 28 April 2021)

There are three complementary reasons for the UK to collaborate with Africa:

- **Scientific:** African researchers are uniquely placed to help answer major global problems.
- **Development:** Investment in African research capacity helps some of the world’s poorest communities.
- **Self-interest:** Research collaboration will underpin diplomatic and trade links as Africa fulfils its potential.

The UK is well-placed to take a leading role. African participants at the ARMA seminar confirmed that the UK is seen as a leader in funding collaboration. Case studies collected by Universities UK³ provide strong evidence of impact from existing investments.

After the United States, the UK is Africa’s second biggest collaborator⁴. UK universities are strongly invested (Fig. 2). But this position is being increasingly challenged. Leading African universities are sought after as research partners. Strong competition exists for the next generation of African scholars. 43% of all international scholarships for students in sub-Saharan Africa now come from China⁵.

Funding: building back better

Restored funding for collaborative projects should be embedded in a new, ambitious, and holistic approach, by:

- **Establishing the terms of collaboration:** Equitable partnerships need African ideas and agendas, as well as British ones. Regulations should make it easier for Africans to instigate projects and consortia, involve Africans in peer review and evaluation, ensure equitable allocation of resources, publication, and intellectual property. Once made, funding commitments should be firm.
"It's key to acknowledge past failings. A problem in the early days of GCRF was the short timeframes. Now we need to try and build lots of run-up time to allow creative collaborations to grow and ensure that partners in the global south aren't dropped in at the last minute."
– Seminar participant
- **Funding innovation:** In recent years universities have received a core allocation for ODA-related activity. This has been distributed through the national funding agencies in England, Northern Ireland, Scotland, and Wales. The total funding is much less than that available for specific projects, but the impact has been disproportionate. It allows flexibility to develop new partnerships, provides seedcorn funds for new ideas, and helps develop core capacities. It is particularly important that this funding channel is maintained.
- **Using a strategic approach:** Universities that wish to prioritise African links could develop clear, long-term strategies. These should be inclusive - promoting interdisciplinary and long-term activity. They should embrace training, consultancy, alumni and teaching as well as teaching. **See Box 2.**
- **Understanding the structures:** Collaboration thrives best where there is common understanding of objectives. The UK must continue to play a central role in developing an African research management profession. Research managers in Africa and the UK should engage in two-way discussions to develop common products. **See Box 3.**
- **Advocacy in Africa:** In the short-term, most of the funding for collaboration will come from the UK. African partners already contribute resources and expertise, but governments could do more. African governments committed to spending 1% of GDP on research as long ago as 2006, but by 2019 had reached only 0.42%, against a global average of 1.7%¹⁰. Advocating for research spending should be part of the UK diplomatic and trade brief in relevant countries.

2. HARNESSING UNIVERSITY RESOURCES

African strategies at institutional level can focus resources, bring together interdisciplinary teams, and demonstrate commitment. Glasgow Caledonian University has embedded Africa in its long-term strategy to 2030. Other new structures include:

- Perivoli Africa Research Centre, University of Bristol <https://parc.bristol.ac.uk>
- Oxford Africa Initiative www.afox.ox.ac.uk
- University of Coventry Africa Centre www.coventry.ac.uk/africa-centre
- Sussex Africa Centre www.sussex.ac.uk/africacentre

3. A STRATEGIC APPROACH

UK universities and funders should engage with the long-term development of an African research management profession. Some are already doing so through the Research Management Programme in Africa (ReMPro Africa) programme, which brings together major stakeholders on four key areas:

- Leadership
- Sustainability
- Standards
- Capacity Building

Link: <https://www.aasciences.africa/aesa/programmes/research-management-programme-africa-rempro-africa>

This policy statement is informed by the views of African and UK participants at a seminar organised by ARMA and AESA-ReMPro¹ and funded by Wellcome. It was written by Dr John Kirkland, Fellow at the National Institute of Economic and Social Research (NIESR), with input from Eva Kagiri-Kalanzi, Programme Manager at ARMA.

References

- 1 *Making Africa-UK Research Links Sustainable*. Virtual seminar convened by the UK Association of Research Managers and Administrators, 6 May 2021. A summary of conclusions can be found in the ARMA/AESA publication *Global Goals: Co-creating Africa-UK Research Management Solutions*, page 23.
- 2 *Global Britain in a Competitive Age, the Integrated Review of Security, Defence, Development and Foreign Policy*. Cabinet Office, 16 March 2021. www.gov.uk/government/collections/the-integrated-review-2021
- 3 *Cuts to ODA will limit UK universities' role in solving global challenges*. 12 March 2021 www.universitiesuk.ac.uk/news/Pages/cuts-oda-limit-uk-universities-role-solving-global-challenges.aspx
- 4 SciVal® database, Elsevier B.V., <http://www.scival.com>. Downloaded on 28 April 2021.
- 5 Research undertaken by Education Sub-Saharan Africa www.essa-africa.org/scholarships_impact This formed part of their monitoring for the UNESCO2020 Global Education Monitoring Report, which can be viewed at <https://unesdoc.unesco.org/ark:/48223/pf0000373718/PDF/373718eng.pdf.multi.page=312>, pages 295-297.
- 6 Newton Fund www.newton-gcrf.org/newton-fund
- 7 Global Challenges Research Fund www.ukri.org/our-work/collaborating-internationally/global-challenges-research-fund
- 8 Royal Society FLAIR Fellowships, for example www.royalsociety.org/grants-schemes-awards/grants/flair
- 9 UKRI Official Development Assistance letter 11 March 2021 www.ukri.org/our-work/ukri-oda-letter-11-march-2021
- 10 Janet Midega, Catherine Kyobutungi, Emelda Okiro, Fredros Okumu, Ifeyinwa Aniebo, Ngozi. *African Universities must muscle up and fill massive R&D gap*. The Conversation, May 18, 2021. www.theconversation.com/african-countries-must-muscle-up-their-support-and-fill-massive-randd-gap-161024