

Africa Knows! Looking back and looking forward

Straddling many boundaries

Africa's knowledge expansion

On the basis of the country knowledge profiles, we can say that Africa's knowledge infrastructure has recently expanded tremendously, and that the results of the expansion of education can be felt throughout the continent.

Around 1960, Africa's average adult literacy rate was very low, but currently it is beyond 70%. The expected years of schooling for children increased from a median level of 8.2 years in 2000 to 11.0 years in 2018. And the number of universities increased from a mere 107 in 1960, with South Africa leading, and many countries having none, to an astounding 2262 in 2020, with at least one university in every country and (in numbers) Nigeria leading, followed by Morocco and Ethiopia.

Of those universities and other tertiary knowledge institutions more than 60% are currently private institutions. In many countries the expansion of higher education started in the 1990s, and the very fast expansion of private tertiary institutions happened from 2000 onwards. Africa currently has many more students and alumni from tertiary institutions than ever before, and these people are leading a further expansion of higher education, research, and innovation in the continent, and beyond.

Diversity across countries remains enormous, of course, with current adult literacy rates going from only 16% in Niger and 22% in Chad, to 96% in the Seychelles. The expected years of schooling in 2000 was only 2.9 years in Djibouti and Niger, but 15.7 years in Libya. In 2018 the range was between 1.9 years for Somalia to 15.1 years in Tunisia, and with substantial improvements in most countries during the last two decades.

Decolonising academic minds

'Decolonisation' has elicited a wide range of responses from the conference participants. For some, the issue was, and still is, regarded as odd, so many years after most African countries became politically independent. Some parts of Africa, such as Ethiopia, have never been colonized. Others feel that the impact of colonialism and its institutions should not be overemphasized (it was said to be "just a scratch in the long history of Africa"), or it is being

regarded as “too long ago”, or it takes away the agency (and blame) from African leaders for their policy mistakes and behavior after independence, and puts the blame on ‘the past’, or on ‘colonials’.

At the same time, many participants said that, even without ever experiencing colonial overlords, colonial mindsets can be influential, and long lasting, and we think that ‘decolonising the (academic) minds’ really IS an issue, both for Africans and for Europeans – including from countries that have never been colonisers, or have not been engaged in slavery or supporting Apartheid. Moreover, it was also raised as an issue for Asians and Americans. So let us try to summarise some of the mindset issues that have been discussed during the Africa Knows! sessions in December. We will do that schematically, and encourage you to add and comment!

Colonial mindsets and practices in academia

- Framing the relationship between partners as ‘capacity development’, ‘training’, or ‘helping out’ rather than collaboration;
- Preferring leadership in research consortia and in project evaluations to be taken by partners from outside Africa;
- Preferring to publish in non-African journals and with non-African publishers;
- Dependence on ideas, publications, and funding from outside Africa;
- Ignoring indigenous knowledge;
- Disregarding scholarly work not written in English (or French);
- Preferring mono-disciplinary collaboration arrangements;
- Prioritising (first) authorship of non-African scholars in publications;
- Publishing about Africa without taking note of African contributions in the same field;
- Publishing in journals for which others have to pay (behind paywalls).

Decolonised mindsets and practices in academia

- Co-creation of research and innovation in teams with equals;
- Make use of indigenous institutional strength and experiences, and don’t rely on people and funds from elsewhere;

- Encourage African leadership in research teams and in project evaluations;
- Encourage Africans to be first author in cases of joint research;
- Be aware of available local contributions to studies about African affairs, and use it in teaching and in publications;
- Encourage students and authors in African Studies to include many references from Africa;
- Ensure that all partners contribute financially to research projects, conferences, publications, and other forms of collaboration;
- Encourage teaching, conversations and publications in other languages than English, and promote bridging the language divides;
- Highlight indigenous/endogenous ideas and practices;
- In teaching about Africa include more pre-colonial history, and more knowledge from and about marginal areas;
- In African Studies, give recognition to the importance of North Africa and its linkages with SSA;
- Put more emphasis on Africa's linkages in past and present with Asia and Latin America, and within Africa;
- In encouraging 'African' contributions do not judge 'African' by skin colour.

What next?

Any academic conference has many different 'layers of impact', but this one intended to have those impacts at all levels at the same time, and that also deserves dedicated follow-up activities by all participants individually, by groups of participants (often led by the convenors of panels) and by the conference organizers. And some of the conference activities will continue for a little longer: the Blogs, the conference Magazine, and uploading the video recordings and panel reports. And all authors who have agreed that their papers can be seen by 'everyone' (as Africa Knows! Working Papers on the conference website) make the website a rich resource for many scholars, students and others, together with all other contents, that will be freely online from now on.

Let us look at 'five layers' of likely (or perceived) impact.

It is obvious that many academics participate in (academic) conferences mainly because they want to be heard by fellow academics and because they use it as a stepping stone for (academic) publications. That's what many regard as the apex of scientific success and often their promotions depend on their publications, where these are published and how often they have been cited (and by whom). So undoubtedly, conference papers presented at Africa Knows! (and most of those visible as free online working papers) will also find their way in separate edited books, and journal articles, and some of those as a joint effort of some panel convenors and authors.

In addition, academics are almost always also teachers, and many use the ideas formed during conferences as a major input in their teaching and supervision activities. In that sense a conference like this one can be seen as awareness raising about contents and forms of 'learning about Africa'. And the fact that most panels will be visible as recorded sessions online, and that there will be written reports (and for some: books and/or articles) and many papers online is a rich knowledge paradise for students and scholars to use.

The third layer is that this conference intends to address structural problems in academia in dealing with 'the past' and in structuring the 'knowledge industry' and 'teaching'/'training'. In the section above we reflect on practical ways to tackle some of these issues and we hope it strengthens those pioneers who really want to change things.

A fourth layer is the impact that discussions and results of this conference and its products will have in "powerful circles" beyond academia: politicians, and civil servants/policymakers in both Africa and in Europe; people in NGOs, in journalism, in business, etc. During the conference we have specifically addressed some of the ways of building those bridges.

And then a fifth layer is the connection between all this and 'local', 'indigenous', 'common' people or whatever phrase you would like to use, and how these people can and do play a role in knowledge creation, and what linkages do and could exist between them and 'academics' (including students). Panel 44 with examples from Tamale was one of the examples of what the attempts are, and panel 29 even did a step further.

All five layers are important and of course we know: it can't be done all at the same time everywhere. Changing attitudes is not an easy thing, and after successes in what we see as "the right direction" there can also be some counter-steps. Success is never granted and changes are never eternal.

At the African Studies Centre in Leiden, and in LeidenASA, we had and have to 'fight' on all those levels at the same time in an academic environment that is often deeply conservative, but where we as ASCLeiden did and still do get a lot of room to manoeuvre. And we also see that in other African Studies Centres: the ones in Europe (supporting each other in AEGIS, and exchanging lots of experiences), the ones in Africa (e.g., those united in the Association of African Studies in Africa), as well as those in Asia, Oceania, and the Americas.

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