

Dear participants of the Africa Knows! conference, dear colleagues!

First of all: a happy, healthy, and social 2021, although it will take time before 'social' will be back to what we were all so used to before 2020!

In December 2020, we experienced the opening sessions of Africa Knows!, and we assume that most of you have had a chance to experience the wonders of 'virtual' meetings, and that you have enjoyed it and learned from it! You can see a lot of what has happened on www.africaknows.eu (and there is more to follow), and you probably also saw that the country profiles are (almost) ready now, and that some very interesting blogs have appeared as well.

From 18 January until 24 February we will resume, with many other panels, and we hope and expect that you will attend many of them. If you have logged in all of you can have access to these panels, and you can also see (and read!) all papers of all panel sessions. There really is a wealth of ideas and evidence, for example in the recent [blog posts](#) by *Jonathan Jansen* on decolonization, and by *Birgit Meyer* on religion in Africa.

See here for the rest of the [conference programme](#). Please note to **log in at the conference homepage to access the 'enter virtual room' buttons, recorded videos and full papers.**

If you have ideas for blog posts, possible contributors, or other contributions beyond the panels, please send your suggestions to Marieke van Winden (m.c.a.van.winden@asc.leidenuniv.nl) and David Ehrhardt (d.w.l.ehrhardt@luc.leidenuniv.nl). And please also enjoy the films and music that we have included in the programme.

The last few lockdown weeks have been a good moment to reflect on some of the lessons learned so far. Let us highlight two of those:

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 the 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.

Please enjoy Africa Knows! part 2!

Ton Dietz, David Ehrhardt and Marieke van Winden