

Africa Knows! Looking back and looking forward

Straddling many boundaries

The Africa Knows! conference tried to straddle many boundaries. It connected Africa and Europe. Within Africa it connected the North, the South, the West and the East, and within Europe participants came from countries as diverse as Ireland and Russia, Sweden and Portugal. We also had participants from America, several Asian countries and Australia. The conference connected teaching, training, research, applications, and innovations. It tried to be truly multi-disciplinary and explore inter- and transdisciplinarity, with panels convened not only by researchers but also by members from civil society and the business sector, and with a lot of inputs from beyond academia, including civil servants from various backgrounds, including the African Union. It connected knowledge about primary, secondary and tertiary education, both historically and with an eye to current and future demands. And it tried to connect all of this to contextual issues and trends in Africa and in the world.

Unsurprisingly, in COVID-times, the conference incorporated lessons learned in using virtual teaching, learning, and co-creation. But it also straddled the boundaries of 'academic knowledge' with what is called indigenous knowledge, and with 'other forms of knowledges', including debates about religion, African spirituality, and art. Material and non-material heritage and the way to conceptualise those, as well as the deeply political issues of acknowledgment, 'ownership' and restitution also got a prominent place. Many of the documentaries shown as well as the kora music, and the examples shown of 'visuals' about Africa's museums and universities added an artistic twist to the conference. But at the same time a lot of it was and is also deeply political and challenging.

Crowd funding, crowd thinking, and multi-vocal communication

The financial organisation of the conference combined a financial and organisational foundation from Leiden University and its African Studies Centre, together with crowd funding from twenty sponsors from Africa and Europe (including the Leiden-Delft-Erasmus Rotterdam connection that will be connected as the LDE African Studies Assembly, LeidenASA), and with fees paid by many conference participants. The conference organisation gave panel ownership to convenors, who were supported by the conference organisers from Leiden and from NomadIT. Convenors came from all over Africa and Europe, and that is also true for authors and other participants.

Students also played a prominent role, both from Europe and Africa, and with a remarkable presence of students from the African diaspora in Europe. The podcasts included on the website, the panel reports and the country knowledge profiles are all a result of major and innovative student involvement. The fact that most papers and almost all panel video recordings have become an online resource for the global classroom and for individual learning can be seen as a major side-effect of having been forced by COVID-19 to make this a virtual conference.

The virtual shape of Africa Knows! was unexpected, but a very welcome push to innovate. The conference used it to become multi-vocal: going beyond a classical academic conference with keynotes, panels and papers only. [Blogs](#), [podcasts](#), [video-recordings](#), [higher education country profiles on a clickable map](#), an online [Magazine](#), [collections of artwork](#), [music](#), and [documentary films](#) have all been part of the rich knowledge dish Africa Knows! provided. And the results will be available as an online resource for many years to come – all with a much smaller environmental impact than a traditional, 'live' conference would have made. Of course, a virtual conference is also a burden to the environment; so part of the conference fees have been transferred to the 'Trees for All' movement, offsetting part of the electricity impact on the climate.

Africa's knowledge expansion

Let us now turn to content.

On the basis of the country knowledge profiles (on the Africa Knows! website), 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 (and within) 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, with substantial improvements in most countries during the last two decades.

The youth voice deficit

What became very clear during the conference is that access to knowledge infrastructures has increased a lot, but three major concerns remain. First, the expansion of quantity does not always mean the expansion of quality and relevance, and although a gradual shift is taking place towards competence-based education and more emphasis on linkages between education and the labour markets, a lot still needs to be done.

Second, there is a major mismatch between the education sector and employment: on the one hand, high numbers of graduates are not getting jobs at the levels of their aspirations; and on the other, many skills are not adequately available for the many challenges Africa faces. As a result, a major structural change needs to take place in the knowledge sector as a whole to cope with the challenges of the 21st century in Africa and in the world.

This brings us to the third concern: the lack of voice for Africa's youth in reshaping their educational and research institutions, and a cry-out for more transparency, better leadership, better governance, and more relevant capabilities to support the aspirations of Africa's youth. There is immense potential for positive change within Africa's youth, as we have seen in many contributions to the conference that were focused on youth, or presented by brilliant young Africans.

It is time to decolonise academic minds

One of the themes that resonates with young Africans in different parts of the continent, especially South Africa, is the call for 'decolonisation'. Unsurprisingly, this term 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, and some parts of Africa,

such as Ethiopia, have never been colonised. Others feel that the impact of colonialism and its institutions should not be overemphasised (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 behaviour 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. 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, without claiming to be comprehensive, let us try to highlight some of the mindset issues that have been discussed during the Africa Knows! panels and that struck us as most insightful, or challenging.

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).

Decolonising academic minds and practices

- Co-creation of research and innovation in teams with equals;
- Make use of indigenous institutional strength and experiences, and do not rely on people and funds from elsewhere; encourage national and local government, business and civil society in Africa to take knowledge creation much more seriously and encourage them to increase the funding basis for teaching and research;
- 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 relevant sources 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 Sub-Saharan Africa;
- 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;
- Epistemic decolonisation and decolonising the knowledge ecosystem are only two elements of broader economic, political, and cultural decolonisation. Although Europeans can play a role in this process as well, African actors should take the lead in this process;
- As Africa is a major provider of the resources needed for global technological progress and only reaps very meagre benefits of the high-tech value chains, African claims for a much more substantial role in these value chains should be supported. Acknowledge the need to train many more Africans in the skills needed to reap those benefits;
- Since the 1990s, Europe and Africa have both been colonised by the 'Big Five' high-tech companies, based in the USA, and also China's and India's high-tech role is growing. Africa and Europe can join hands to develop their own, more autonomous high-tech positions and create a more equal global playing field.

What next?

The Africa Knows! conference aimed to have impacts at various levels simultaneously, as we will explain below. Maximising these impacts requires dedicated follow-up activities by all participants individually, by groups of participants (often led by the convenors of panels) and by the conference organisers. Some of the conference activities will continue for a little longer: the blogs, the conference Magazine, and uploading the video recordings and panel reports. All authors who have agreed that their papers can be seen by 'everyone' (as Africa Knows! Working Papers on the conference website) are making the website a rich resource for scholars, students and others, together with all other content that will be publicly available at www.africaknows.eu from now on.

Five layers of perceived impact

Let us look at 'five layers' of likely (or at least aimed-for) 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. Many regard this as the apex of scientific success, not least because their careers depend on 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 panel convenors and authors.
- As a second layer of impact, academics can use the ideas formed during conferences as a major input in their teaching and supervision activities. In that sense, a conference like this can be seen as raising awareness about the contents and forms of 'learning about Africa'. 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 publicly available papers is a knowledge paradise for students and scholars to use for educational purposes.
- The third impact layer is that this conference intended to address structural problems in academia in dealing with 'the past' and in structuring the 'knowledge industry' and 'teaching'/'training'. This includes the language issues. The practical and fundamental points

that we shared reflect on ways to tackle some of these issues and we hope they strengthen those pioneers who really want to change these structures and practices.

- A fourth layer is the impact that discussions and results of this conference and its products will have in powerful circles beyond academia: politicians, civil servants/policymakers in both Africa and in Europe; professionals in NGOs, in journalism, in business, etc. In the conference we have specifically addressed some of the ways of building those bridges.
- Finally, 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 practices from Tamale in Northern Ghana was one of the examples of these attempts and there are various papers and discussions in other panels showing the way forward.

Knowledge diplomacy

For us, all five layers are important and of course: it cannot be done all at the same time everywhere. Changing attitudes is not easy, and after successes in what we see as 'the right direction' there can also be some regression. Success is never granted and changes are never eternal.

Scholars working in African Studies (both in Europe and in Africa) often had and have to 'fight' on all those levels at the same time in an academic environment that is often deeply conservative, and where 'room for manoeuvre' asks for a lot of knowledge diplomacy. Creating networks of change agents across boundaries of countries and disciplines is one way to do this, as is showing: 'it can be done!', as we hope this conference has proven.

Online education: A Call for Action!

A final point. Africa Knows! shows the importance and quality of online teaching and learning. It asks for a major rethinking of support programmes (like fellowships) funded by various agencies. A substantial part of these funds should be devoted to facilitating online education, for example through global classrooms. Such online education should be firmly co-created, with a substantial role for diaspora scholars from Africa in Europe, and a lot more involvement of African scholars in teaching and supervising in African Studies and other academic teaching programmes in Europe.

Work for these initiatives should not be seen as voluntary contributions, they should be fairly and equally paid for. For instance: we suggest that the follow-up of the Dutch [Orange Knowledge Programme](#), and like-minded programmes elsewhere in Europe, should devote at least 25% of its funding to these initiatives, and African scholars (both in Africa and in Europe) should become the (co-)owners of those programmes. It is time for the Netherlands (and for the European Union) to support these initiatives and make online teaching and learning much more integral parts of African-European collaboration efforts.

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