Advancing Research in Commonwealth Africa: some reflections

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It is an honour to be here and I thank Prof Morshidi and the organisers for the kind invitation. The Commonwealth of Learning has been closely associated with discussions leading up to the establishment of the CTEF from the very outset, when the idea was first mooted at the 16 CCEM held in Cape Town. As a network partner, it is our objective to share our own experience and resources and to learn how best we can contribute to the success of this new organization. I will reflect on 'Advancing Research in Commonwealth Africa' which I have prepared jointly with my colleagues, two of whom are from Africa. I hope it will serve to set the stage for the deliberations to follow and the policy document that will be developed.

But first the context and a word about the Commonwealth of Learning.

COL is one of the three Commonwealth intergovernmental organisations, with the Commonwealth Secretariat and the Commonwealth Foundation being in London. COL has its headquarters in Vancouver and a regional office CEMCA, New Delhi. Our mission is to help Commonwealth Member States and institutions to harness the potential of open and distance education and technologies for expanding access to education and training. Our motto is 'learning for development'.

As you know, this year the Millennium Development Goals will come to a close. Countries have seen much progress in reducing poverty and providing access to basic education. Given the success of the MDGs, the international community will adopt another set of 'Sustainable Development Goals' in September. If we review some of the sustainable development goals identified by the UN High Level panel, we find that these relate to ending poverty, empowering girls and women, providing quality education and lifelong learning and ensuring that people lead healthy lives and have the opportunities for livelihoods. How can we promote learning that leads to sustainable development? What do we mean learning for sustainable development? Learning that leads to economic empowerment, social development and environmental protection.

UNESCO's post-2015 education agenda calls for equitable and quality lifelong learning for all by 2030. There is an emphasis not just on basic but also post-basic education. Quality of teaching and learning will be an important area of focus. Youth and skills development for work are an increasing area of priority for most governments around the world.

The Commonwealth inter-ministerial working group has proposed access, quality and equity as the three overarching goals of education beyond 2015. Every child must have nine years of basic education, quality post basic education for livelihoods and education must be socially inclusive. In both sets of priorities identified by UNESCO and the Commonwealth, we find a common emphasis on education that must lead to development that is sustainable.

What role will universities play in helping us achieve the development goals? Traditionally universities have been strong in teaching and research but the overall record of outreach activities has been uneven. Universities in the 21st century cannot exist as isolated islands of scholarship and research but will have to play a more proactive role in national development.

As the Chair of the African Union Commission says and its worth quoting in full ' HE must help develop the skills to accelerate our development, to industrialise, to build and maintain our infrastructure, to manage our diversity and natural resources, to build shared prosperity, to strengthen and deepen our democracies and to building peaceful societies. In short, universities must contribute to sustainable development.

Africa is the youngest continent in the world with 50% of its people under the age of 25. The age participation rates (APRs) are less than 10% and of these there is a high rate of migration of tertiary graduates. Over 77% of tertiary educated citizens of the Seychelles and 56% from Mauritius emigrate to OECD countries.

The positive dimension of this brain circulation is the remittances to the home country. Of the $33 billion that were sent to Africa in 2014, the top five receiving countries were Nigeria, Kenya, South Africa, Uganda, Lesotho. As development accelerates, there would be incentives to draw back and retain the educated workforce on the continent. As we can already see in India and China, many of the qualified citizens are returning and bringing additional investment into the home countries.

Therefore, one policy recommendation could be to invest in research that leads to sustainable development. How can research add value to the development process in terms of strengthening livelihoods? How can research support marginalised communities? How can research contribute to national development? For instance in an oil rich country such as Nigeria, could there be a focus on research in this field? Is there a need for setting up specialist institutions in different regions of Africa?

Let us briefly review the status of research in SSA.

The African Union calls for more PhDs who can generate new knowledge and contribute to economic development. McGregor identifies some challenges: most governments are still struggling to provide basic and secondary education for all. Doctoral studies are therefore not a

top priority. Scarce resources are diverted to other pressing areas such food, health, infrastructure. Most higher education institutions in SSA were established after independence in many countries, that is, after the 1960's and have yet to build a research culture. PhD supervisors are often inexperienced. While Africa accounts for 12% of the world population, it accounts less than 1% of global research.

This Slide gives you an idea of the number of PhD students across some countries in Commonwealth Africa. The numbers are uneven and data scarce. Research has doubled between 2003 and 2012, with South Africa and Nigeria being the main contributors.

One reason could be attention to policy and funding to promote research. The SADC Protocol on Education seeks to encourage research among Member States by supporting students whose research proposals have been accepted by South African institutions. Students from SADC countries are given the same benefits as South African students.

The policy recommendation could be to allocate more funding for research and offer bursaries and scholarships. The SADC Protocol model could be adopted/adapted by ECOWAS and EAC for the West African and East African regions where many Commonwealth African countries are located.

COL has activities in all 19 Commonwealth Member States in Africa. How have we contributed to research? Let me share some examples.

Research capacity needs to be strengthened. COL has developed materials on Practitioner Research and Evaluation Skills Training (PREST), which is available on our website. What is this about?

It has two sets of Modules and one User Guide. The Core Modules are generic and can support capacity building in research skills. These include quantitative, qualitative and mixed research methods as well as how to report on research. The second set of Handbooks deals specifically with distance education research.

COL also offers a CEMBA/MPA programme, which has two basic courses on 'Quantitative Techniques' and 'Research Methodology'. These are included in the USB, which has the complete PREST materials.

The PREST materials were developed ten years ago and are being revised in Botswana. The revised materials will focus on research in education. It will reflect current practices in research including the use of ICT and OER. The target audience: practitioners, educators, and those wishing to pursue a doctoral degree. Since it will be available as OER, it can be adopted/adapted by any institution.

PREST has been accredited by the Botswana Training Authority and the one year programme focuses on training researchers in SADC countries. Here is the first cohort of graduates.

COL support a programme of Chairs in ODL and OER and this is often implemented jointly with UNESCO. COL-UNESCO Chairs have been established at Mzuzu University, Malawi, Open University of Tanzania, National Open University of Nigeria.

Another strategy for promoting research is COL's Pan Commonwealth Forums which happen once every three years. The previous one was organized in collaboration with the National Open University in Nigeria in Abuja in 2013. These forums move to different regions of the Commonwealth. Significantly, the next PCF will be organized in partnership with the Open University of Malaysia and will be held in Kuala Lumpur during 27 Nov-1Dec, 2016. COL's objective is to promote research and to train a cadre of future leaders to take forward the baton from the previous generation of gurus and stalwarts.

COL also offers Excellence in Distance Education Awards during its triennial conferences— these are meant for institutions, DE materials, the use of OER and for DE learners.

COL brings out several publications to provide a platform for scholars from around the Commonwealth to share their research. COL brings out an online Journal of Learning for Development which provides a forum for the publication of research with a focus on innovation in learning, and its contribution to development. It welcomes articles on theory, policy and practice.

The policy recommendation could be to promote international and regional collaboration in research; strengthen research capacity through a targeted approach and harness ICTs for research.

What else can be done to promote research in SSA?

Research shows that even if we provide all facilities and infrastructure, without proper mentoring, all the inputs will not prove to be effective. Panda suggests that research capacity could be built through a mentoring relationship which can either be face to face or at a distance.

What can we learn from the industry? In this study carried out to determine what factors contribute to research and development in industry, senior managers believed that research and innovation is driven primarily by the corporate culture of an organization. How do we define this enabling corporate culture? This means staff have autonomy and freedom, there is a system of recognition and rewards in place and a culture where failure is not a stigma but is accepted as a lesson learned. The junior staff had a slightly different perspective on what drives research and innovation. . They believed that research and innovation depended largely on the right people. So we find the importance of people as critical to driving research.

In a recent paper, Bland et al identify 15 institutional characteristics that promote research in German institutions. These sum up what we have already discussed: careful recruitment and selection of the right people, clear goals, an emphasis on research within the institution, adequate resources, and mentoring.

In short the German model for building an institutional culture of research emphasises the importance of collegiality, where people can test out their out-of-the-box thinking without the fear of being ridiculed. It means that staff have enough time earmarked for research rather than having to fit it in within over-committed teaching schedules. It also means that each institution needs to identify and build on existing strengths.

To sum up, if we need to promote quality research, universities will need to do three things: foster an environment of creativity and innovation; value and reward research and use the research to inform both policy and practice in relevant and meaningful ways.

No discussion of trends in research today can be complete without a reference to Open Access policies and practices. Open Access means that a user is able to copy, use and distribute a piece of research with proper attribution of authorship. This is beginning to gain ground and in 2013, a European Commission study found that half the new published research was now open and free. According to another 2014 study, of the 114 million publications on the web, 27 million were open access. Since this is a growing trend, the research community cannot ignore the open access option.

This Slide gives you a range of open access policies from the US, UK and the European Commission and this is a useful resource for institutions wishing to adopt this approach.

Institutions in Africa are embracing the open access route and have established their own collection of peer-reviewed scholarly journals.

The policy recommendation emerging from this section is that Universities can adopt open access publishing policies and share Good Practice. Our regional office CEMCA developed a 5 module course on Open Access with UNESCO.

Thank you for your kind attention