

UNIVERSITIES IRELAND SEMINAR ON IRISH UNIVERSITY LINKS WITH EASTERN AND SOUTHERN AFRICA

*Trinity College Dublin
31 March 2005*

REPORT

INTRODUCTION

This seminar was organised at the suggestion of the nine Irish university presidents in order to undertake a preliminary exploration and discussion of the state of Irish university co-operation with countries and higher education institutions in Eastern and Southern Africa, and how that co-operation might be enhanced by the universities on the island working together on a co-operation project (or projects). The Development Co-operation Ireland division of the Irish Department of Foreign Affairs has offered Universities Ireland a number of free flights for a trip to those regions to explore with key people there the possibilities of such an inter-university initiative.

Around 100 people in Irish universities known to be interested in links with Eastern and Southern Africa were invited and 45 attended. All nine universities, North and South, were represented. The seminar was facilitated by Mr Paud Murphy, former World Bank Lead Education Specialist for Africa and General Secretary of HEDCO, who also prepared and distributed in advance a discussion paper ('Recent Trends in Development Co-operation, the contribution of higher education institutions, and some suggestions for a role for Universities Ireland in Africa' – see *Appendix*).

The seminar was formally opened by the Provost of Trinity College Dublin, Professor John Hegarty, who said that if the seminar group could identify and begin to develop one worthwhile inter-university co-operation project with Africa, that would be a good piece of work.

OPENING SESSION

Paud Murphy made a presentation based on his discussion paper. He finished by identifying three possible roles for Universities Ireland: 1. Support for the role of higher education institutions in African countries; 2. Support for the achievement of the Millennium Development Goals; and 3. Support for the work of Development Co-operation Ireland.

These three roles he then broke down as follows:

1. Support for a country's efforts to plan and realise its HE sector, and support for the country's individual institutions in terms of planning, infrastructure, specialised courses and linkages.
2. Achieving the Millennium Development Goals, whether through direct support for UN, Global Fund and NGO work on one MDG; direct support for one country's efforts; or support for tertiary institutions' efforts towards achieving the MDGs in one country.

3. Support for DCI in the form of courses on management and planning of development co-operation; specialist technical courses; joint assessments; and contribution to research, analysis and evaluation of DCI-supported work.

WORKSHOP REPORTS

1. How can Irish universities work together to help a country in the region to strengthen its tertiary education sector?

Facilitator: Professor Jane Grimson

- a. Capacity-building at a several levels: at institutional level – through governance, administration and management, curriculum development, entrepreneurship; at sectoral level – through advocacy groups and interfacing with government. Co-operation must be sustainable and there must be transfer of knowledge to African institutions.
- b. Millenium Development Goals: Irish universities should contribute in some niche area where they have expertise – for example in ICT in education (Ireland has a good reputation for education in Africa and ICT is one of the products of our Celtic Tiger economy). This area can be culturally sensitive, i.e. e-learning could be developed locally. Accountancy is another area of recognised Irish expertise.
- c. Partnership with DCI: universities can contribute significantly to DCI's research capacity, particularly in evaluating projects and initiatives for long-term sustainability (e.g into the many diseases which are currently little researched).
- d. Universities Ireland needs to act as a catalyst for this work for Irish universities, so that, for example, staff are facilitated to work in Africa through sabbaticals.

2. How can Irish universities work together to support the achievement of one or more Millenium Development Goals across a number of countries in the region?

Facilitator: Professor Andrew Cooper

Which MDGs are Irish universities most likely to have an impact on?

- a. Building global partnerships to assist less developed countries to become more developed, based on Ireland's experience of doing that through the EU.
- b. Choosing individual universities in Africa to work with is a difficult choice. It would be better to use existing national and regional networks in the selected countries.
- c. Twinning and mentoring are the best way to build co-operation with African universities, while minimising the risks of 'brain drain' by doing the training and development work in the African countries.
- d. Importance of building 'people to people' relationships as the best way to sustainability.

3. How can Irish universities work together to support the achievement of one of more Millenium Development Goals in one country in the region?

Facilitator: Dr Peadar Cremin

Three key areas:

- a. This work needs a new body to coordinate and manage it. What kind of body? How will it support sustainable rather than fashionable co-operation activities? The experience of HEDCO should be learned from. The new body could

- begin with a study of that past experience and by mapping co-operation activities already happening in Irish universities.
- b. Twinning is a good mechanism, involving partnership and equality based on back-and-forth travel and research. It needs to be multi-personal to be sustainable. It needs to be a four way process involving Irish universities, universities in an African country, DCI and the relevant African government department. Country-to-country and university-to-university twinning should be considered.
 - c. Priority areas of particular importance to developing countries are primary health, rural and community development and teacher education.
 - d. Rather than choose particular disciplines or areas, we need to send people who are prepared to listen – the visiting group should play the role of ‘matchmaker’ between Ireland and the African countries.

4. How can Irish universities work together to help Development Co-operation Ireland to enhance the capacities and skills needed to deliver a growing aid programme?

Facilitator: Professor Áine Hyland

- a. Any projects need to be driven by the developing countries and respond to their needs.
- b. The internationalisation of students is happening fast (and Education Ireland is being established by the Irish Government to take advantage of it). But internationalisation must also be about what Ireland gives back to the developing world. For example, should a certain proportion of the money Irish universities receive from full fee-paying international students be given back in assistance to students from developing countries?
- c. Significant amounts of HE research funding are now available in the Republic of Ireland. What part of this might contribute to work with developing countries?
- d. We need to find a way to bring together the significant expertise in co-operation that exists in Irish universities to inform the Universities Ireland exploratory visit to Africa.

FINAL PLENARY DISCUSSION

Chair: Dr Sean Farren, former Northern Ireland Minister of Finance

In the context of the offer from DCI and the discussions in the working groups, the plenary discussed the next steps to be taken in relation to the visit to Africa of a UI representative group.

The following points were made during the discussion:

Preparation for the visit.

More homework might be needed prior to the visit e.g. drawing up an inventory of what links already exist between Irish universities and Africa?

Universities Ireland should co-ordinate a baseline study of current linkages: what had worked and what had not worked.

Measuring the capacity for development co-operation in Irish universities would involve looking at co-operation with all developing countries, not just the six DCI priority countries in Africa.

On a point of information, it was explained that Universities Ireland had undertaken a preliminary 'scoping study' of Irish university links with Eastern and Southern Africa in summer-autumn 2004 at the request of the UI presidents, but only some universities had responded to UI's request for information (through the UI liaison people in each university). Only two of the nine universities had responded in a comprehensive way. In consequence, only a part of this scoping exercise had been included with the seminar discussion paper.

UI could commission someone relatively quickly to carry out a study of existing Irish university links with Africa.

In response to the question: did DCI know which Irish universities and institutes of technology were involved in the six DCI priority countries in Africa, it was considered that the representative of DCI in a particular country would know the involvement in that country.

The importance of a foundational body.

There was need for a "foundational body" to manage HE co-operation with developing countries and this might need to be put in place before UI work commenced in any country. The seminar had heard that there was no obvious template available in other developed countries for this kind of HE co-operation work.

The universities were not institutionally well-organised in this area, and there was a need to develop a new body to manage HE co-operation.

Any proposed new organisation should have a thorough and detailed knowledge of those countries.

It would be important to ascertain the availability of "enabling funding" to support a new higher education co-operation body.

There was great goodwill and considerable expertise in Irish universities which had not yet been tapped. A mechanism needed to be found to bring that goodwill and expertise together for the purposes of co-operation with developing countries.

HEDCO was still in existence (linked to International Education Board - Ireland) and had projects in South Africa and Malawi (although fewer than in the past). However five or six years ago a decision was taken by the Irish universities to focus less on HEDCO and more on the IEBI and attracting overseas students to Ireland (IEBI will soon be subsumed into a new body, Education Ireland).

Who should represent UI on the trip

There might be unease in Irish universities about how representative the small group visiting Africa would be of the Irish university sector. The nine universities might be asked to nominate one member each to the group.

Which countries should be visited?

It would be a pragmatic decision to visit those countries which were DCI priority countries.

There had been one exploratory meeting with Universities Ireland about this initiative, and DCI did not consider that its offer of a small number of free air tickets to Africa should be seen as a constraint. For example, if two countries are being selected as destinations for a visit by a UI group, they should not automatically be treated as priority countries for this initiative, but perhaps as a laboratory for co-operation with a wider set of countries.

The visit should be confined to one or two countries.

Purposes and Outcomes of the visit

Universities Ireland could only add value by bringing the nine universities on the island together in a new co-operation project, and thus not duplicating what is already happening.

The UI group visiting Africa should be on a fact-finding mission. It should come back to the seminar group with a report outlining Irish universities' experience of co-operation since the 1970s and the situation in the one or two African countries it visited.

The delegation's work should be based on a number of principles: collaboration and partnership between the Irish universities, and between Irish and African universities; the sustainability of any work undertaken; capacity building; and building on existing Irish university experience of co-operation.

The UI visit should be a fact-finding one, seeking to establish the needs in the countries visited, rather than showing what Irish universities might offer. As such, it did not need to be preceded by a comprehensive survey of capacity in Irish universities.

UI was trying to draw the universities, North and South, into this initiative, itself a difficult thing to do. It did not matter so much whether one, two or three countries were visited – what was more important was that “something a bit different to add to the well-being of African countries” should be sought.

It would be artificial to select one of the Millennium Development Goals for priority work. It would be more useful for a UI group visiting Africa to work on the inter-linkages between the MDGs, where there was a wealth of expertise available.

Conclusion

In conclusion, it was pointed out that UI's initiative was an opportunity to examine the questions being raised in this seminar with people in Africa, without at all cutting across the valuable work that is already going on in the Irish universities. DCI had recognised the potential usefulness of this initiative by offering air tickets to a small UI delegation go to Africa to explore it further. No fact-finding group could commit DCI, Universities Ireland or this seminar group to anything. It was only an opportunity to visit a number of countries for exploratory discussions with relevant people there, and to come back with some ideas that UI might be able to take forward in addition to what is already going on in the universities. The UI fact-finding delegation would be reporting back to this seminar group (as well as to the nine Irish university presidents) after their trip, and after discussion of its findings decisions could then be taken on the way forward.

The next step would be for the four facilitators and UI secretary to meet to discuss the procedures for selecting UI representatives travelling and countries to be visited (with advice from Paud Murphy).

Finally, the organisers were thanked for the timeliness of this seminar.

***Report compiled by Andy Pollak
18 April 2005***