

From Ivory Towers to Poverty Eradication: SARUA gets Wings

Donors are now beginning to put their money where their mouths are for Higher Education in Africa.

A new force for social change is set to take off in southern Africa. Dutch Government funding seems set to enable SARUA to deliver on its core objectives: to strengthen collaboration between universities in the SADC region and to establish higher education as a fulcrum for integrated regional development.

In the words of Professor Njabulo Ndebele, chairperson of the Southern African Regional Universities Association: ‘SARUA begins its work in earnest at an opportune time for higher education in the SADC. The fundamental role of higher education in the development of the region and in its constituent nations is now fully accepted. Indeed, this is part of a historic trend across the entire African continent.’

Greater regional integration is an expressed goal of member states of SADC. An active SARUA will stimulate such integration in the higher education sphere, and through it into the general socio-economic development of the region as a whole.

The Netherlands Ministry of Foreign Affairs has provided just over R19-million start-up funding over three years, and will also consider funding one of the association’s main programs. The British Department for International Development (DfID) has committed nearly R50-million over four years in response to the Commission for Africa’s call for the revitalization of higher education on the continent. The money will be channeled through the Association of African Universities (AAU) for disbursement into the regions. SARUA, a regional partner of the AAU, has been requested to develop a proposal that will ensure a strategic fit for funding from this source for the region.

SARUA was founded in February 2005 after an extensive process of consultation and research with the leaders of public universities across the 14 countries of Southern Africa. It now has a membership base of 58 public universities from all the countries of Southern Africa; from as far north as the DRC, to Madagascar and Angola, and down to South Africa.

At the time of its establishment, it was claimed that SARUA would be the first association of its kind in Africa to do two crucially important things simultaneously, both of which are in line with the ideals of the SADC protocol, and AU and NEPAD ideals.

The first was to address the capacity and research needs of SADC higher education institutions. The second was to address the social, cultural and economic development priorities of the region. These broad aims served to establish the fundamental modus operandi: ‘that SARUA,’ according to its Strategic Implementation Plan for 2007 to 2012, ‘had been constituted to be a programme-focussed and outcomes-based organisation.’

Professor N. Bhebe, Vice-Chancellor of the Midlands State University of Zimbabwe, and a member of the SARUA executive council, echoes these sentiments when he says: ‘SARUA is a pioneering initiative whose success will depend upon critical and innovative partnerships and a willingness of stakeholders to positively contribute to the Association’s programmes.’

SARUA’s CEO, Piyushi Kotecha, , points out that the development of leaders for trade and industry, government, and public sectors such as the judiciary, science and technology, security, education and health, is critical for Africa if it is to break out of its cycles of poverty, war and chronic under-development. ‘We believe that regional collaboration between universities is one way of rising to this challenge.’

Professor Lufunda Kaumba, Rector of the University of Lubumbashi (in the DRC), says that he hopes the SARUA programmes will now be able start, thanks to the financial support, and that they will ‘develop solidarity between academics of the region who will then combine their efforts to fight against poverty and serve as a scientific basis for the African Renaissance’.

‘SARUA,’ Kaumba continues, ‘is a window on the potentialities that the universities of the region offer as regards education, research and services to the communities. This window enables us to discover new things in the SADC neighbourhood – and it also enables us to be discovered by our neighbours.’

Professor Bojosi Otlhogile, Vice-Chancellor of the University of Botswana, underscores this when he identifies ‘isolation’ as ‘an historical defining characteristic that SARUA is committed to breaking down’.

‘But it is worth remembering,’ he continues, ‘that the isolation felt by millions of people within the continent is real. The huge numbers of languages bears witness to inaccessible terrain, non-navigable rivers, and piecemeal isolated development. And the closed silos of colonial rule and post-colonial instability have aggravated this endemic African isolation. If successful, SARUA will begin to march across these old divisions to set up new self-perceptions – and perhaps even new governance systems – that could transform southern Africa into a new and more purposeful world.’

As Kotecha expresses it: ‘A successful SARUA will mean that students and staff could circulate more freely throughout the region, and in the process kindle a cultural and intellectual infusion of different kinds of knowledge from different origins. A successful SARUA will also have implications for the internal governance of nation states within the region. It will impinge upon a country’s immigration laws and its information technology networks, to mention but a few. What will be essential for SARUA to achieve – in fact, this is how its success will be measured – is a strong sense of collective leadership bound by a common vision that sees higher education not only as a catalyst for national economic development, but also for a broader regional development. If that is achieved, it will be possible for us to negotiate real change.’

SARUA’s first job is to undertake a baseline study or survey of all universities in the region, requested by the SADC secretariat. The call for such a study arose directly from a meeting of Education Ministers in Botswana and captured in the 2006 Kasane Declaration

The primary focus of the study will be two-pronged:

- To collect key information and perspectives on the role, size, scope and orientation of higher education in the 14 countries that constitute the SADC region.
- To provide an overview of the existing challenges and opportunities facing higher education institutions and their country governments that can assist in the development of national and regional strategies to strengthen higher education.

In practical terms, rather than attempting to tackle the extensive list of potential activities generated during the period of consultation with the SADC's Vice-Chancellors, the broad aims of the Association have been articulated in four specific programmes that deal with obvious areas of critical need in the southern African higher education context.

Institutional governance and leadership recognises the need for training and support in such key areas as research development, HR policy, institutional planning, leadership development, and financial and resource management. In response, SARUA will institute relevant training for key personnel and hold regular high-level symposia and leadership summits. Participants will form the basis of an increasingly powerful regional leadership and management network.

Information and communication technology (ICT) should form the backbone for science and technology innovation, research and communication, and the development of the knowledge economy. But the situation in southern Africa is far from ideal. Apart from South Africa, resources in SADC member states are poor or virtually non-existent. In recent surveys, more than 80% of sub-Saharan universities were inadequately connected. SARUA believes that ICT should be seen as an essential service into universities, as basic as reticulated electricity and water. The ITC programme therefore rests on three pillars: connectivity, management, and open access. SARUA has already begun to work with specialist organisations in order to improve ICT management capacity and expand access to high-speed bandwidth. SARUA is also working towards the establishment, in each SADC country, of National Research and Education Networks, and is in conversation with potential partners in the shape of the UK-based International Network for the Availability of Scientific Publications, and the Tertiary Education Network in Cape Town.

Since 1990, Africa has been losing 20 000 professionals annually. In response, SARUA's programme relating to science and technology development is based on four fundamental needs: to encourage new scientists, especially women scientists; to retain and support leading African scientists; to improve the quality and quantity of science and scientific publications; and to build a vibrant knowledge economy in the region. The programme will consist of assessments and studies to identify important science and technology initiatives, and to develop partnerships between these initiatives and other initiatives on the continent of Africa.

Linkages will also be forged with the capacity-development support structures emanating from NEPAD and the Commission for Africa.

HIV/AIDS pandemic poses one of the most serious threats for the SADC, worst hit region in the world, and not least for the region's universities. Apart from instability within student populations and staff complements, there is also the more general impact of unmet demands for graduates in all disciplines from both the public and private sectors. The main components of the SARUA response will be: to use the extensive work already done in a number of universities in the region, consolidate best practice, and develop innovative approaches to HIV/AIDS management to secure institutional stability and growth for higher education; and to encourage member universities in the areas of HIV/AIDS research, policy development and management practice.

'SARUA begins its work in earnest at an opportune time for higher education in the SADC,' says Ndebele. 'The fundamental role of higher education in the development of the region and in its constituent nations is now fully accepted. Indeed, this is part of a historic trend across the entire African continent.'

7 February 2007

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