

Session 5: Workshop 2

Title: The Indian Ocean Connection

Presenter: Professor G Mohamedbhai, Vice-Chancellor, University of Mauritius

Chair: Professor Pramod Talgeri, Vice-Chancellor, Central Institute of English and Foreign Languages, India

Rapporteur: Liz Washbrooke, ACU

Professor Mohamedbhai gave a presentation based on the formation and development of two comparatively recent regional groupings: the University of the Indian Ocean (UIO) and the Indian Ocean Rim Academic Group (IORAG). He discussed the role of each with regard to such factors as student mobility, regional growth and human resource development, and explained how each is funded and structured. Key points summarised included the following:

- both UIO and IORAG aim at regional cooperation
- a small island state *can* play a catalytic role in regional cooperation
- external funding is essential for meaningful output
- there is a need for a proper coordination mechanism in the regional network
- there is a need to ensure that UIO/IORAG activities complement those of ACU and other associations (UIO is set to become an association in 2002)

The discussion which followed expanded on these issues as well as raising new matters and offering solutions to some of the problems outlined by Professor Mohamedbhai.

The regional groupings were seen to have benefited the University of Mauritius by opening it up to the region and fostering new international liaisons: in short, improving collaboration. Similarly, Indian academics were thought to have benefited in trade and investment, as well as from the increased mobility potential of students. This theme of mobility was recurrent throughout the discussion: an example was given of a multi-university degree programme, whereby all participating students attained the same recognised level of education, leaving none at a disadvantage in terms of mobility potential. It was suggested that a similar course be implemented across four member universities of UIO, focused on a topical subject area such as diaspora. Such a scheme, it was argued, would help meet the need for visible cooperation voiced during the discussion. (It was noted that at present there is no credit transfer system between the member universities, although Professor Mohamedbhai expressed his hope that this would soon change.)

On the subject of networking, an example was cited of the successful use of video conferencing for collaboration between Jawaharlal Nehru University and Rupert Charles University of Heidelberg in Germany, although this was deemed unsuitable for UIO at present due to the poor technical infrastructure of some members.

The importance of academics taking initiative and asserting themselves, rather than allowing themselves to remain at the bottom of the funding priority list behind

governments and businesses, was repeatedly stressed. It was agreed that academics must come up with new schemes and funding initiatives, establish links and go ahead and put their plans into practice. To this end, it was thought that academics should push ahead with their ideas once they have even two or three interested parties, rather than wait for the support of all members of a particular network or association, which might never be forthcoming. One major disadvantage here, identified by Professor Mohamedbhai in his presentation, is the absence of an effective contact mechanism between countries for collaborating and disseminating information, such as those used among governments and businesses.

Key points/issues summarised from discussion:

- regional groupings have clear benefits to member universities/countries in terms of:
 - regional collaboration
 - trade and investment
 - increased mobility
- need for long-term objectives as well as short-term projects with ‘bouts’ of irregular funding
- on-line education/video conferencing as the way forward?

regional groupings must collaborate rather than compete →	strive for a tripartite approach between government, business and academia to overcome the prestige/funding problem in the academic sector
need for visible cooperation →	
importance of academics taking initiative and asserting themselves →	
need to establish an effective contact mechanism →	