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Universities and the Millennium Development Goals: ACU Conference of Executive Heads, –25-27 April 2010, Cape Town

Universities can play a pivotal role in the delivery of the Millennium Development Goals (MDGs) it was argued at the annual ACU Executive Heads conference last month, co-hosted by the universities of Cape Town, Stellenbosch, Western Cape, and the Cape Peninsula University of Technology. Vice-chancellors and senior university staff from 35 countries gathered in South Africa to focus on the contribution that universities can make to the sustainable achievement of the 8 goals.

With only five years left to the MDG target date of 2015, and a review summit due for September this year, the conference was timely in highlighting both the obstacles still to overcome, and the role of higher education institutions in facilitating progress – a task made more challenging by the omission of higher education in the MDGs. Commonwealth Secretary-General Kamallesh Sharma, in a speech read on his behalf, acknowledged that whilst universities may take it as read that they have 'the brain power, the capacity for research and development, the policy analysis and the training skills to answer the MDG call', they need to prove this rather than simply assert it.

Reflecting the two-tier contribution that universities can make – at the institutional and departmental level – opening plenaries examined the progress and priorities of the MDGs and institutional commitments to these; individual sessions looked at more specific goals and targets. The importance of adjusting institutional commitments to the priorities of each society emerged in presentations by Stellenbosch, the University of the West Indies and Edith Cowan University, Australia. Each had adopted quite varied strategies, set in the context of national priorities, but all framed within overarching development objectives.

Individual sessions focussed on hunger, gender equality, education, sustainability, poverty and health – the latter has been in particularly stark focus following the Commonwealth Health Ministers meeting in Geneva in early May, and the realisation that the Commonwealth needs 4.1 million more health workers to achieve the

MDGs. Participants heard concrete examples from throughout the Commonwealth of work universities had done in these areas, and it was apparent that whilst each of the goals have their own particular issues and requirements, they cannot be viewed in isolation, and that universities, through teaching, training, advising and research, have a unique role to play in connecting the goals.

After examining the goals themselves, the perspective shifted to their implementation. The role of universities in conflict and post-conflict reconstruction examined case studies in Northern Ireland, Rwanda, South Africa, Sri Lanka and Zimbabwe [see [VC-Net 93](#)]. There was a particular focus on how involved (in trying to end a conflict) or detached (as a place of refuge) individual institutions could be; however, their essential role in society was felt to mean that despite an inevitable tension, they can have both a practical and academic part to play.

Despite the broad scope of the MDGs, the various ways in which universities can contribute to these, and the geographic spread of the institutions represented, several recurrent themes emerged. Delegates endorsed a statement acknowledging that universities have been addressing development issues long before the MDGs were developed, but that the capacity of universities to achieve their potential here has been limited by a lack of recognition for this role, most recently within the MDGs. The statement called on governments and intergovernmental bodies to afford this recognition and concluded with several specific recommendations, including to more effectively share expertise through collaboration at institutional, national and international levels; for universities to review their curriculum at regular intervals to ensure that graduates have the skills and attitudes to contribute to the attainment of MDGs; and that measures be put in place to record and monitor the contribution that universities make.

The ACU also co-hosted the 3rd INORMS Congress in Cape Town (11-15th April) under the theme: 'Managing Research for Impact: New approaches to Research and Innovation Management' (see [other news](#) for details).

Sources:

- Cape Town conference statement <http://www.acu.ac.uk/publication/download?id=243>
- Conference presentations http://www.acu.ac.uk/conferences/cape_town_programme
- Karen MacGregor, University World News: *Universities must be citadels not silos* (<http://www.universityworldnews.com/article.php?story=20100502103801345>)
- Commonwealth Health Ministers Meeting 2010, 'The Commonwealth and the Health MDGs by 2015': *Ministerial Statement on MDGs* (http://www.thecommonwealth.org/Internal/190698/219361/commonwealth_health_ministers_meeting_2010/)
2010 MDG Review Summit (High-level Plenary Meeting of the General Assembly), New York, to be held 20-22 September (www.undp.org/mdg/summit.shtml) ,

What place for the humanities?

In cash-strapped times, universities, like any organisation, are pushed to re-assess their spending priorities. In an era of 'evaluation', 'impact' and 'knowledge transfer' and heightened inter-university competition, 'priority subjects' are often those which can clearly demonstrate a measureable contribution to the economy, or to national development [see [VC Net 84, 94](#)]. Science, technology, engineering and medicine (STEMs) tend to be favoured – for example the UK funding council has encouraged its universities to concentrate their energies on 'strategically important subjects', and rewards science places with greater teaching income. Where do the humanities fit into this? What place is there for humanities scholarship and teaching, when there may be no 'business case', where researchers will struggle to claim 'spin-off' benefits for their work, and where students are not trained with specific careers in mind? Does humanities scholarship become a luxury of wealthier times?

Such conversations are not only confined to the academy. The wider public naturally wants to know that their monies are well spent, even more so in lean times, and as tax rises and front line service cuts are threatened. While questions are periodically raised over the value of humanities, the recently announced closure of Middlesex's (very successful) philosophy department, and talk of wider cuts, have provoked a passionate defence of humanities education. Martha Nussbaum argues that democracies depend on the rounded and enlightened citizens that the humanities help produce: citizens who understand their global interdependency, and appreciate the world and its many languages and cultures. But as others have been quick to point out, scientists share in this too. The crux is perhaps that humanities scholarship supports and nurtures a public culture where the arts stimulate, where literature is seen as important, and where there is space to debate the primary values underpinning everything else – including for example scientific ethics, the deployment of medical advances and the social impacts of technology.

On the employability side, universities are increasingly tasked to develop the skills that business demands – the World Bank's 'Accelerating Catch-up' report argues that African universities should focus on 'problem-

solving, business understanding, computer use, teamwork and communication skills'. But employers in a knowledge economy, where specific technologies rapidly become outdated, may strongly value the flexibility, creativity and analytical and written skills which the humanities are well placed to serve. Countries which overlook these may find themselves less not more competitive in the future. Following a wider trend of investigations into employability, a group of Australian universities will test these assumptions through research into the employability of BA graduates, looking at the merits of specialisation or generalisation, contributions to labour markets, and the aptitudes sought by employers. The results may offer some interesting challenges to conventional wisdoms about the relative advantages of different disciplines.

The response of students also matters. Required to pay their own way more than ever before, do they still want to study humanities? With the growth of business and IT courses across the world it seems that subjects with an obvious vocational return are popular. MBAs are in demand, taken not just by senior executives, but by increasing numbers of young graduates. It is hard to find a university which does not offer one or more MBA programmes. Similarly, universities seeking to recruit greater numbers of foreign students must offer the courses these students want. When fees are high these are often those which seem to offer good prospects for a quick 'return'.

In lower income countries the lament for the decline of humanities funding in wealthier corners could not unreasonably be met with little sympathy. Constrained financing has long been the standard operating mode of many universities in Africa, Asia and elsewhere. It is little surprise that many have opted for income-generating courses in business subjects, or that the same faculties often teach 'development studies' too: a concern with economic growth dominates the contemporary development paradigm. Ironically, it was the humanities which fared relatively better across Africa (surviving if not flourishing) where their STEM counterparts struggled: they were cheaper to teach and required no expensive laboratories (although were still limited by good library collections). Recognition of the long neglect of science has re-focused attention towards rebuilding STEM subjects in recent years. But with limited money to go round, it seems the humanities will continue to struggle, even though it is clear that many entrenched – and new – challenges in diverse post-colonial nations rely on the insights of their historians and the abilities of their linguists. These are themes which the ACU and the British Academy have sought to address through ongoing work with African colleagues (see The Nairobi Report).

The situation of the humanities is not entirely negative, however. In Australia, the arts, humanities and social sciences have reportedly maintained their share of overall undergraduate degrees, while data from the US suggests that between 1988 and 2008 there was greater growth in the number of BAs awarded than in bachelors degrees overall; a substantial turn-around from a pre-1988 decline, and one which suggests that the liberal arts tradition may not be under threat as some fear. A reported trend in Australia has been the growth in combined degrees, fusing humanities with a more vocational element (such as law or education).

Any discussion of the humanities prompts the recurrent question 'what are universities for?', and more pointedly, who should pay? What is the ultimate result for the process of slow, critical enquiry which is so fundamental, but often under-valued? Can we expect the public – or individual students – to pay for this? How else do we sustain it during difficult times? The financial crisis has sparked many conversations about values; global conflicts and increasing migration give rise to new challenges of intercultural understanding and tolerance. Can we find ways to assess universities and their scholarship by the insights into life and the world which they offer – and not only by metrics and measures?

Sources:

- John Morgan, Times Higher Education: *Loss of philosophy at Middlesex raises fears for humanities*, 6 May 2010 (<http://www.timeshighereducation.co.uk/story.asp?sectioncode=26&storycode=411482>)
- Martha Nussbaum: *Not For Profit: Why Democracy Needs the Humanities*, Princeton, New Jersey: Princeton University Press, 2010 (<http://press.princeton.edu/titles/9112.html>) (extracted in Times Literary Supplement, 30 April, 'Skills for Life')
- World Bank: *Accelerating Catch-up: Tertiary Education for Growth in Sub-Saharan Africa*, 2009 (http://siteresources.worldbank.org/INTAFRREGTOPEDUCATION/Resources/e-book_ACU.pdf)
- Jonathan Harle, ACU/British Academy: *The Nairobi Report: frameworks for Africa-UK research collaboration in the social sciences and humanities*, March 2009 (<http://www.acu.ac.uk/publication/download?id=174>)
- Australasian Council of Deans of Arts, Social Sciences and Humanities: *Employability of Bachelor of Arts Graduates* (<http://www.dassh.edu.au/resources/documents/Employability%20summary%20web.pdf>)
- Jeremy Gilling, Campus Review: *Bonfire of the humanities? Not by a long shot*, 11 May 2010, (www.campusreview.au)

Academic libraries – responses to the economic crisis

In the first months of the developing economic crisis many sectors, including HE, were to some extent protected by established institutional budgets and long-standing national policy. Later, whether the crisis

prompted investment commitments or immediate cuts, there continued a common rhetoric which referenced national economic needs, HE/business links, research impact, employability and skills agendas [see [VC Net 84](#)]. Either way the effect of the crisis is now being increasingly felt within institutions, with academic and research libraries, among other services, facing greater use and expectations, and at the very least reallocated resources. Over recent months several studies have reviewed the response of the library sector; these also have implications for other HE services in how 'value' is defined, communicated, and understood, how institutional priorities are best served with reprioritised funding, and the realistic potential for greater collaboration.

A Charleston Conference/CIBER global survey on the effect of the downturn on libraries, published late last year, reports that over a third of academic libraries expect a smaller budget in 2 years' time. Anticipated spending cuts focus on information resources, with services and infrastructure being less vulnerable. Reduced opening hours are possible, however (also perhaps confirming a trend away from experiments with 24 hour opening.) Only a minority expect to reduce staffing, probably through recruitment freezes or leaving posts unfilled, an acknowledgement that 'cutting resources is almost twice as likely to be effective than cutting staff'. A UK-focused RIN/SCONUL guide (March 2010) - specifically directed at senior institutional managers and policy makers - likewise considers the balance between content, staffing, and services in budgets. It particularly notes the distorting impact of rising serial subscription costs ('current levels of journal provision may well be unsustainable'). In staffing strategies the emphasis is on areas with the biggest impact - the 'speedy delivery of the information and services that accurately meets the needs of students and academics' - though it also cautions that the pressure to adopt innovative services and approaches (e.g. curating open access initiatives) may be restricted by cuts and the loss of key staff. A US (Ithaka) survey last month also points out that trying to balance the library's traditional and innovative roles depends on the differing interests and sympathies of academic disciplines, arguing that addressing this dilemma 'is perhaps the most urgent strategic challenge facing academic library leaders'. The US context nevertheless presents a model which current costs now may hasten - the move to electronic-only journal subscription.

Much of the reaction has, positively, focused less on the effect of project cuts than on defining library 'value' - often in response to management - and on raising the profile of the library and the services it offers. An ARL 3-year 'Lib-Value' project, with its emphasis on return on investment (ROI), was confirmed at the beginning of the year; another recently established ACRL review aims to draw together recent research on academic library performance to highlight best practice. Similarly an Elsevier Foundation summary gives examples of how academic librarians (in India, New Zealand, and the UK among others) determine and represent value. In Australia a study commissioned by Group of Eight (Go8) university librarians powerfully records the dependence and quality of research on the information resources provided by academic libraries. (Those surveyed 'would need not only to spend at least 2.36 times the current level of expenditure to locate and obtain access to information resources but also to spend, in terms of time, at least 31% longer'.) Such analyses are effective in highlighting the impact which access to library collections enables, as distinct from indicators measuring the size or history of collections.

A further strategy linked to the competition for funding is the drive to raise awareness of the library (a recent ProQuest survey in North America quotes a marked increase in libraries 'protecting...funding by becoming more aggressive in marketing and outreach'). Raising the profile of the library within institutions is as significant, not least to make non-library staff aware of the various areas to which the library does and can contribute.

The competition for resources may encourage greater collaboration both within the library sector (academic, non-academic, national), and within institutions - between academic libraries, faculties, IT, even university career, international, and marketing offices. The continuing influence of rankings, quality assessment, and drives for 'elite' institutional status could further profile comparative library strengths. The challenge for many libraries, as for any research department, remains in responding to immediate needs while also developing expertise and drawing together collections which are distinctive and lasting. It is the need to communicate this potential as well as the current, if sometimes unrecognised, value of research which libraries and academics share. Stronger and more concerted efforts to support each others' objectives and needs are undoubtedly of mutual interest to both.

Sources:

- *The Economic Downturn and Libraries: Survey Findings* (A Global Survey of the World's Libraries in Challenging Times) [UCL CIBER; Charleston Conference; 2009 (www.ucl.ac.uk/infostudies/research/ciber/charleston-survey.pdf)]
- *Challenges for Academic Libraries in Difficult Economic Times: a Guide for Senior Institutional Managers and Policy Makers* [RIN; SCONUL; 2010 (www.rin.ac.uk/challenges-for-libraries)]
- *Faculty Survey 2009: Key Strategic Insights for Libraries, Publishers, and Societies* (7/4/2010) [Schonfeld, R.; Housewright, R.; 2010; Ithaka S+R (www.ithaka.org/ithaka-s-r/research/faculty-surveys-2000-2009/faculty-survey-2009)]

- Association of College and Research Libraries (ACRL): Value of academic libraries project (5/1/10) (www.ala.org/ala/newspresscenter/news/pressreleases2010/january2010/researcher_acrl.cfm)
 - Association of Research Libraries (ARL) *Value, Outcomes, and Return on Investment of Academic Libraries* (Lib-Value) Project (12/1/10) (www.arl.org/news/pr/ROI-4may10.shtml)
 - Developing Strong Library Budgets: Information Professionals Share Best Practices (Library Connect, Pamphlet 12) [Elsevier Foundation; 2010] (<http://libraryconnect.elsevier.com/lcp/1201/lcp1201.pdf>)
 - 'Why then we rack the value': Building Value Frameworks for Academic Libraries (Go8 Librarians, undertaken by Outsell, Inc.; 2009-10.) (<http://go8.edu.au/go8-members/go8-committees/62-go8-librarians>)
 - ProQuest Survey shows libraries are turning up the heat on marketing and outreach to protect budgets (14/1/10) (www.proquest.co.uk/en-UK/aboutus/pressroom/10/20100114a.shtml)
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Other news

Caribbean Conference on Higher Education (CCHE), Paramaribo, Suriname, 11-13/4/10

The first Caribbean Conference on Higher Education took place last month in Suriname, supported by Unesco (IESALC; & Kingston Cluster Office) and the OAS. It analysed regional trends and perspectives, quality assurance, and academic co-operation among other themes, with calls for action addressed to Caribbean government representatives, HEIs, and international agencies.

(www.iesalc.unesco.org/ve/index.php?option=com_content&view=article&id=1745:oea-dhdec-unesco-kingston-y-unesco-iesalc&catid=62&Itemid=716)

INORMS (International Network of Research Management Societies)

INORMS, 3rd Congress – was held in Cape Town (11-15th April) under the theme: 'Managing Research for Impact: New approaches to Research and Innovation Management'. It reviewed impact with reference to the research and innovation process, innovation, and development, as well as funding, and research management careers. The next INORMS Congress is being hosted in Copenhagen (14-16/5/2012)

(www.inorms.org/INORMS2010ConferenceCapeTown.html) (www.inorms2012.com)

University access/entrance:

Recent/ongoing reviews and initiatives covering access, widening participation, and university entrance include the following:

- Australia: HEPPP (HE Participation & Partnerships Program) (18/5/10) (www.deewr.gov.au/HigherEducation/Programs/Equity/Pages/News_HEPPPGuidelines.aspx)
 - NZ: NZQA Review of University Entrance (13/4/10) (www.nzqa.govt.nz/ncea/for-students/ue/ue-review.html)
 - UK Office for Fair Access (OFFA): What more can be done to widen access to highly selective universities? (19/5/10) (www.offa.org.uk/press-releases/director-of-fair-access-sets-out-way-forward-for-widening-access-to-highly-selective-universities/)
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Key publications

A selection of recent publications on higher education:

- **A Guide to Scenario Planning in Higher Education** (LFHE Research and Development Series, 2:4) [Sayers, N.; 978-1-906627-17-1; Leadership Foundation for Higher Education (LFHE); 2010] (www.lfhe.ac.uk/publications/research.html) Scenario planning in HE: its role, value and practice.
 - **Crisis, Cuts, Contemplations: How Academia May Help Rescuing Society: Proceedings of the Conference of the Magna Charta Observatory, 18-18 September 2009** [Magna Charta Observatory; 978-88-6208-134-4 (2010) (www.magna-charta.org/popup_papers_atti_2009.html)] International perspectives on the current role of the university, with working group analyses summarising responses on new academic disciplines, academic freedom, and ethics.
 - **Economic Modelling of Improved Funding and Reform Arrangements for Universities** (30/4/10) [(KPMG Enotech – for Universities Australia; 2010 (www.universitiesaustralia.edu.au/documents/publications/policy/docs/KPMG_Econtech_Final_Report_30Apr10.pdf)] Update of a 2009 report reviewing the impact and benefit of tertiary education sector funding in Australia.
 - **Education Impact Study: the Global Recession and the Capacity of Colleges and Universities to serve Vulnerable Populations in Asia** (ADBI Working Paper series, 208 (3/10) [Postiglione, G.; Asian Development Bank Institute (ADBI); 2010 (www.adbi.org/files/2010.03.29.wp208.education.impact.study.pdf)] Analysis of measures to support HE in serving poor and vulnerable populations in the economic recession.
 - **Evaluating Commonwealth Scholarships in the United Kingdom: Assessing impact in the health sector** (Ransom, J. et al) (CSC Evaluation & Monitoring Programme) (Commonwealth Scholarship Commission in the UK) (2010) (www.cscuk.org.uk/docs/assessing_impact_health.pdf) Published as part of the Commonwealth Scholarship Commission's continuing evaluation programme, this study shows the impact of CSFP alumni in the health sector, particularly with reference to health-related MDGs.
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The authors, Nick Mulhern and Jonathan Harle (and guest author James Ransom), are always pleased to receive comments on the usefulness and content of this briefing. News from other Commonwealth countries, which might be of wider interest, is also most welcome. They can be contacted by e-mail on vcnet@acu.ac.uk or by fax on +44 (0)20 7387 2655. This and previous issues can also be accessed online at: www.acu.ac.uk/member_services/research_and_policy_analysis/vc_net
