

A Need for an African Academy for Information Communication Technologies (ICTs)

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1. INTRODUCTION

Information technology has opened the “four” corners of the world and Africa has more than benefited from the new technology probably more than usual. Where libraries would not be able to acquire new books and journals, electronic databases have tended to solve this problem a little bit especially for researchers. The Internet itself has enabled aspiring students that would have been unable to find books, papers, and numerous other scholastic materials get access to them. Every time I visit Africa, I am amazed by the exuberance and the enthusiasm the Internet, the Web and wireless technology have brought to the people, especially the youth, on the continent. What I have observed is that there are more young people on the African continent interested in technology, especially information technology, than what I normally see in North America. In fact enrollment in engineering and information related disciplines like computer science, in North America, has been on a steep decline in the last few years. If my observations are correct, not in so long a future, Africa may be called upon to supply scientists to Europe and North America. However, African advancement in these technologies depends on the creation of a large pool of African researchers in information technology and other scientists to help in the development, dissemination, indexing and preservation of new and existing knowledge. This is a formidable task given that the current Africa’s ICT physical infrastructure. Twenty five years ago, Africa’s technological imprints were but non-starters compared to the giant steps that were being taken in the rest of the world. Throughout the continent, ICT capacity and infrastructure were and are still low and in some places non-existent in others, and equipment acquisition has been sporadic and unplanned. However, Africans are just deprived not disabled. African scholars in leading universities and institutions have set themselves on a quest to be the ICT incubators and jump start ICT education and research and build ICT capacity to help in the construction of the badly needed infrastructure. For these institutions and everybody else involved in the quest for technological advance, the climb to the top of the technological mountain has been steep.

However, with the typical African determination, they are inching on to the top. Twenty years into the climb, there are signs everywhere that the early efforts are beginning to bear fruits. Everywhere in Africa today, one witnesses exuberance, soaring interest, especially of the young, an increasing inventory of working ICT equipment, an increasing number of confident and young ICT technocrats, an unbelievably large number of young people taking courses in information technology and a growing number of governments believing more in ICT as a tool for development. The African technological acquisition,

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though still low by international standards, driven mostly by an unprecedented indigenous interest in technological development and the numerous and sometimes ambitious initiatives by NGOs and the donor community, is changing the fortunes of Africa, quickly leapfrogging her into the 21st.

For this burst of enthusiasm to continue, bear results and lift Africa, there is a need for continued support of the African scholarship in ICTs. However rosy the picture of African ICT looks, as long as there is no basic support from scholarship by highly trained African PhDs to carry on sustained relevant and fitting research, this much anticipated growth may be still born.

While there is productive and progressive research at a good number of African universities, we are disturbed by a persistently very low production of African research. There seems to be either low interest or a lack of a culture of scholarship. As long as the interest is this low, there is likely to be no meaningful research results. In the long run, it will stifle and eventually kill African original research if it is allowed to continue. As Megan Lindow reports in the Chronicle of Higher Education quoting Susan Balaba Tumwebaze, a lecturer at Makerere University, in Uganda (Megan Lindow 2008), new approaches are needed to support young scholars and ensure that they have adequate time to write and conduct research. Many young scholars are overwhelmed by teaching demands, leaving them with no time for writing or research. One way to stop this and indeed build up a research culture among young African scholars is based on an Academy idea.

We are proposing the founding of a revolving African Academy for Information Communication Technologies (ICTs) to help create interest in research in information technology. The academy will involve young Ph.Ds in information technologies either teaching in African universities or working on research projects in an African organization who are at the point of starting to establish their research careers. In addition, we will also include advanced Ph.D. students at the stage of writing their dissertations.

2. ACADEMY GOALS

The major goal of the Academy will be to build scholar/mentor mechanisms and collaborations that will guide the young scholars through research processes like:

- Paper reviews;
- Research problem identification;
- Finding peers for support;
- Looking for research support;
- Looking/searching for funding agencies – contacting funding agencies;
- Learning to write competitive grant proposals – This is always a problem. I have seen nightmare proposals from Africa;
- Writing grants proposals;
- Etc.

3. ACADEMY OUTCOMES

The specific Academy outcomes are:

- a new culture of ICT research in African institutions of higher learning and research organizations will be developed;
- there will be ICT capacity building in African institutions;
- lifting the level of quality in African institutions of higher learning;
- new research communities that bind together researchers and/or mentors;
- strengthening the level of funding proposal development – hence increasing funding for African research projects;
- learning new ways of disseminating research results through scholarly publications.

4. OPERATIONS OF THE ACADEMY

Between fifteen to twenty scholars will be selected on the basis and merit of their research proposals. Based on those research proposals, renowned scholars will be invited to the academy campus, from

two weeks to one month per group, to work with this group on a one-on-one basis. The invitees will initially present papers to the audience of invited scholars, based on their proposals, outlining what they are working on or what they intend to work on. From this point on and for the duration of their stay at the academy, they will get feedback and suggestions on their research. After the academy, they will stay in touch with their academic advisors/mentors as long as they stay on the same research track. They will also keep in touch with a pool of researchers in their group.

5. DURATION OF THE PROJECT

We expect phase I of the project to run for 3 years. For more information on the Academy, contact the author.

6. REFERENCE

LINDOW, MEGAN. "African Universities Face a Looming Shortage of Ph.D.'s", *The Chronicle of Higher Education*, Tuesday, November 25, 2008, <http://chronicle.com/weekly/v55/i06/06a02403.htm>