

Outcome of 2020 Strategic Retreat Action Plan Moving Forward

Preamble:

The Africa Institute is due for a renewal as a research institute at Western University (Western). Having come under new leadership in August 2020, the strategic retreat was conducted to concretely ensure a vision, mission, and sustainable action plan for the Africa Institute's future at Western. In the midst of a global pandemic and a global social justice movement against anti-Black racism toward peoples of African descent, the renewed direction and purpose to contribute to empowering and uplifting research and academic excellence on the African continent at Western, in partnership with other international partners, could not be more timely. Below are the main themes that emerged from the strategic retreat, which helped shape our vision and mission moving forward, as well as our action plan for the next six to twelve months.

Vision and Mission

a. Community

Create a community that is a voice, a connector, a champion of common issues, interests and goals pertaining to Africa.

b. Collaboration

Address major societal concerns through an approach that is rooted in respectful and reciprocal partnerships, synergy, collaborative and intersectional research. Create intentional and impactful change by fostering an environment that facilitates engagement, strategic communication and alignment of mutual strengths and goals.

c. Capacity Building

Offer bi-directional opportunities for capacity building to the Africa Institute members and African partners. Build the capacity of students by preparing them to work in careers in Africa and/or with organizations that operate in or impact Africa.

Vision/Mission Statements:

External Vision/Mission:

To address African priorities, which will be determined by partners and aligning with our strengths, through impactful engagement in knowledge creation and exchange with African partners and in collaboration with other Canadian and global partners.

Internal Vision/Mission:

To promote equity, diversity and inclusion in all programming, student recruitment, and hiring of faculty and staff at Western; to promote working in inter- and/or transdisciplinary partnerships; and to become a hub for Canada-Africa collaborations at global, national, and local levels.

Main Themes

Research Impact and Knowledge Exchange

d. Interdisciplinary Focus

The primary focus of our research will be interdisciplinary, collaborative, and incorporate capacity building. A priority will be ensuring that diverse areas of research and expertise are showcased across fields addressing challenges from a systems science perspective. Research today is moving further away from single researcher, single discipline-focused research towards thematic, team-based collaborative initiatives, which the Institute will reflect.

e. Impactful Research

It is essential to engage with African partners in addressing their needs, priorities, and ensure we are engaging and striving for reciprocal partnerships that also fit well within our member's research strengths. Research aims and objectives will align with Western research strengths as well as with priorities of African countries and scholars and address major societal issues that will benefit both Africa and the global north.

f. Improved Engagement

Strategic partnership building and long-term relationship sustainability will be a key area of focus. Engagement with partners in governments, organizations, not-for-profit organizations, academic institutions, and communities with a common purpose to build capacity of research and academic endeavors with the African continent will be strengthened.

g. Knowledge Exchange

Improving our knowledge exchange will be tied in with improving engagement. Ensuring that partners are included throughout the process of the research from ideation, development, to implementation and outcomes impact will be a central practice. Constant updates to our website on current projects, research and activities will be vital. Taking advantage of remote learning's opportunities during COVID-19 and post-pandemic to increase engagement and knowledge exchange activities via technology. Further events such as seminar series, course exchanges, workshops will also all contribute to keeping members and partners engaged.

Enhancing Scholarship

h. Lobbying/Advocacy for International Students

Several barriers face many study visa applicants who come from an African country. The Africa Institute will endeavour to remain vigilant and aware of these barriers and play a greater role in advocating to improve and ensure equitable access to Canadian education and success of African students. This includes but is not limited to: provision of scholarships specific for African student applicants; advocating for different grading systems and a fair grading conversion; working with and supporting the Western International and Exchange Student Centre in addressing current Visa challenges faced by African students (government); playing a role in welcoming and engaging African students at Western; lobbying the central administration as well as Western International and the School of Graduate and Postdoctoral Studies for policy creation and action that will remove barriers African students face; support students and trainees in their education and transition to Canadian culture. An alumni network will be built, to provide a platform for current and past students to engage and share opportunities for networking and professional development - which is beneficial to foster a sense of community and sustainability, within the Institute. The Institute will ensure that at least 50 % of scholars engaged in all its programming will be women.

i. Academic Programming

We have a strong network of academic and research expertise at Western to offer Africa-focused programming at Western. Potential approaches include the development of a certificate or diploma program in African studies which can expand to include thematic-based program offerings. We will ensure that a diverse representation of disciplinary areas will be covered by programming at the Institute, in addition to our established strengths in the health field. Moving forward, it will be key that programs are built in collaboration with African partners and with the flexibility to include virtual programs - especially due to conditions such as the current pandemic restrictions and conflicts.

Funding and Partnerships

j. Sustainability

Focus will be placed on long-term sustainable partnerships, and funding that will help build such partnerships to tackle major societal issues within the African continent. Partnership work that is deepened and strengthened through building rapport, meaningful relationships and consistent sharing, will help ensure that we are aligning with our partners' goals and priorities. Funding opportunities should reflect the movement away from single researcher, single-discipline funding models and moving towards collaborative, team-based, long term partnerships.

Action Plan

- ◇ Launch a monthly Africa Conversations series.
- ◇ Develop a certificate program in African Studies that will include content on implications of the history of colonization and slavery; on North- South relationships.
- ◇ Launch an Africa Institute Canada-Africa Young Scholars Coalition that includes Undergraduate and Graduate students, Postdoctoral Fellows and other types of Trainees.
- ◇ Launch an Africa-Canada alumni network, starting with Western alumni, but with ultimate goal being across Canadian post-secondary institutions. Work with pre-existing alumni networks to help achieve this goal, from both student organizations as well as organizations such as the Canadian Association of African Studies to achieve a broad and inclusive national network.
- ◇ Develop strategic partnerships within and outside of Africa, including with other Canadian schools and institutes with similar goals, as well as partnerships that are between public and private institutions.
- ◇ Foster, stimulate and support development of project proposals and work with Development to identify seed funding sources.
- ◇ Strategically pursue large grants that will help build capacity for the Institute and attract top international researchers, scholars, and international trainees working in areas with and for African partners
- ◇ Re-design the website to reflect the new focus of the Institute.
- ◇ Work with recruitment units at Western to improve marketing to African self-sponsored students, both undergraduate, graduate and post-doctoral, to make Western a top choice destination for students from the continent.
- ◇ Interweave equity, diversity and inclusion practices throughout the Institute's work. In recognition of the President's Anti-Racism Working Group's report, the Africa Institute supports and stands with the following recommendations:
 - "Review and improve workforce planning processes to encourage and incentivize the hiring, recruitment and retention of more racialized people into staff and faculty positions in accordance with EDI principles and practices (i.e., continue with EDI CRC, Postdocs and cluster hires). Work with Human Resources and employee groups/unions to establish goals and remove barriers where they exist." President's Anti-Racism Working Group: Final Report May 2020, pg. 20.
 - "Increase the number of courses and programs focused on the study of and scholarship by racialized groups (e.g., Black studies, Indigenous studies, Jewish studies, Islamic studies, etc.). Greater emphasis should be placed on hiring academics who study race related subject areas and are able to provide more opportunities for students to study race and decolonization." President's Anti-Racism Working Group: Final Report May 2020, pg. 21
 - "Introduce specific bursaries and scholarships for racialized students to make it more accessible for them to attend Western and to help ensure they do not experience financial hardship while they are attending." President's Anti-Racism Working Group: Final Report May 2020, pg. 22
- ◇ Advocate for a mission-critical complement of core staff and faculty to be included in Western's current budget process and lobby for inclusion of aspirations of the Africa Institute as expressed in this document, in the ongoing Western's Strategic development process.