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An Assessment of Interdisciplinary Contributions to African Society

Reflecting on the Work of Western's Africa Institute

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Western University is a leading Canadian research university that attracts faculty members from across the globe working across a diverse range of disciplines. A major aspect of the university is its global initiatives that work to build lasting and sustainable relationships with global institutions while helping students obtain a global learning experience. Within the university exists smaller associations of individuals that are able to come together based on their research and activities as a means to share their work and collaborate. This includes the Western Africa Institute, established as a forum for individuals working on research and projects relating to the African continent to come together as a way to work towards solving the most pressing issues facing the continent.

Western University's priorities relating to international activities and ensuring the university's global focus has attracted faculty and researchers that have made the establishment of groups such as Western's Africa Institute a possibility. The quality of research and interdisciplinary approach of the Africa Institute has created a means to address the UN's Sustainable Goals for Development as they relate to the African continent. Within the institute exist actionable programs that reflect interdisciplinary efforts and sustain equal partnerships between African Institutions and Western University. There are however, areas of improvement within both the university and the institute itself that reflect the need for further collaboration and interdisciplinary partnerships to achieve the international goals of the university and the institute.

The following paper touches on the institutional strengths and weaknesses of Western University as they relate to global learning, the work being conducted within the Africa Institute, the relation of that work to the UN Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) as well as the actionable programs that exist at Western University relating to Africa. The goal of this paper is to provide an understanding of where the university and the Africa Institute stand at this point in time as a means to highlight opportunities for collaboration and necessary efforts to further the goals of the Africa Institute.

Institutional Strengths and Weaknesses in Global Learning

As a top research university in the country, Western University is “committed to nurturing a culture of research excellence and innovation”. Western has research strengths across faculties and aims to create global scale research excellence across disciplines. Western’s strengths also lie in its ability to turn high quality research into pragmatic approaches towards achieving international development goals. The global research that is conducted provides tangible benefits locally and globally. Additionally, the university strongly encourages the formation of collaborative interdisciplinary research entities which has made the establishment of organizations such as The Africa Institute a possibility. Existing institutes at Western aim to create collaborative research ventures and includes research participation, funding and administrative participation from outside the university. Western University clearly states its commitment to global learning and intercultural sharing and this commitment has established substantial goodwill within the university to support global learning.

Western International, the branch of the university responsible for facilitating global learning initiatives has grown substantially over the past few years. Currently, programs exist that support international learning and service opportunities for undergraduate and graduate students. There are opportunities for students to internationalize their degree while remaining at the university and programs to mobilize students and compliment Western degrees with international experience. Furthermore, International Week, an annual event held at Western celebrates Western's international community while providing students, staff and faculty with the chance to learn about the different international opportunities available at the university. The research focus within Western International centres on cross-cultural topics and international themed-research. This research is demonstrated across dozens of institutes and committees, including the Africa Institute. The accelerated growth of Western International over the last few years indicates that fact that the emphasis on global learning is growing and at this point, opportunities exist to expand Western's international focus.

The existing research strengths have thus far attracted numerous faculty members that have taken leadership roles in promoting global learning at the university. The university itself, however, lacks systems to facilitate the work. A common sentiment across faculty is that Western does not currently lead in global learning and the success of existing programs relies on the leadership of committed faculty members rather than institutional leadership. While Western International and other bodies across campus work to facilitate

global learning, in comparison to other Canadian Universities, Western is still behind. Africa Institute members in particular work to encourage global learning and exchanges, however, faculty members feel that the university does not offer enough support. For students who do take advantage of existing global learning programs, Western does a good job in terms of preparation including safety training and pre-departure preparation. As an institution, however, Western is still in its early stages of establishing itself as a leader in global learning.

Research that is being done across disciplines can be broken into three different types of work. A lot of programs focus on multidisciplinary work where individuals share their work but progress solely within their own faculty. Interdisciplinary work involves working closely with other disciplines while trans-disciplinary work requires researchers to collaborate in order to come up with new knowledge and incorporate it to the end users. The Africa Institute is one of the few bodies on campus that focuses on the latter two and there are several institutional barriers to facilitating interdisciplinary and trans-disciplinary work. The separation of faculties and varying policies make it difficult to develop and implement interdisciplinary proposals. This results in time and information lags when developing collaborative research proposals. In order to improve these processes and support work across disciplines, university wide policies and procedures need to be put into place to further enable collaboration efforts.

The Africa Institute

The Africa Institute was established as a way to promote the research being done across faculties relating to the continent of Africa. The overarching goal of the institute is *“to be recognized as a world-class institute that serves as an incubator for translational and transformative scholarship on issues dealing with various aspects of African society through collaborative research undertaken by faculty, undergraduate and graduate students, and postdoctoral fellows.”* Since its establishment, hundreds of members have been associated with the institute, working to build sustainable partnerships with one another as well as several institutions within Africa. So far, the institute has seen several successes, most notably, the establishment of the Global Health Systems in Africa professional degree program. The Africa Institute reflects the idea that the era of mono-disciplinary research no longer exists and in order to tackle the worlds largest programs, interdisciplinary research and collaborations are an absolute necessity. The institute has brought together faculty across numerous disciplines and the cross-disciplinary nature of the research being conducted creates opportunities for collaboration across the institute.

Collaboration Examples

One of the most successful translations of research into an actionable program has been the work of Gregor Reid and Sharareh Hekmat in probiotics. Since 2004, Reid has been working with Western Heads East to deliver probiotics to African communities. The probiotic bacterial strain that was identified was chosen due to its anti-pathogen and immune modulatory properties and the fact that it produces a good tasting yogurt when it

is added to starter cultures. Furthermore, using a probiotic yogurt in this community in particular was beneficial because of the areas vibrant agricultural sector which was also supported through the establishment of yogurt kitchens in the area. Although the probiotics are intended for health benefits, this project has had both social and economic benefits by creating employment opportunities for women in African communities. The yogurt itself also acts as an agent against malnutrition and infection. The program has established ten kitchens across each Africa, and every summer, students travel to different kitchens for three month internships to support whatever needs are identified by the hosts. The program engages students across disciplines in a mutually beneficial project that provides students with an experiential learning opportunity working across microbiological, economic and societal issues. This program, therefore, requires the work of faculty members ranging from health to gender studies to ensure optimal outcomes pertaining to all aspects of the program and its intended results. Within the Africa Institute there are several faculty members specializing in these areas of work, which represents a major opportunity to engage in interdisciplinary collaborations to make improvements across the program

Although this program provides many benefits, unfortunately, the distribution of the sachets containing the probiotic has recently been affected by bureaucratic issues and therefore, the probiotic is not being distributed as intended. Although this does present a challenge, it is also an opportunity for further collaboration within the Africa Institute. A potential solution to this problem that has been identified is centralizing the production of

the yogurt. This would entail making it in one facility and then granting women's groups access to sell it in their kitchens. For this to come into fruition, however, there are several requirements dealing with transport and food and safety issues. The success of this potential solution would require collaboration across individuals with operational, health, entrepreneurial and other backgrounds in order to ensure the lasting sustainability of the probiotic yogurt kitchens.

Another notable faculty member involved in the Africa Institute is Valerie Oosterveld, Associate Dean of Research and Graduate Studies in the faculty of law. Her work focuses on international criminal justice issues related particularly to Sierra Leone but also includes the Democratic Republic of the Congo, Uganda, Kenya and The Central African Republic. Her work has been largely focused on the Special court of Sierra Leone and dealing with 'forced marriages' and establishing this term as something separate than sexual slavery or rape.

This research represents further opportunities for collaboration within the institute. Similar to the work in probiotics, this research can be applied to institute members focused on health and well being, economic empowerment and gender equality. Women effected by these crimes are largely impoverished and are also effected by maternal mortality and education. Considering the work of Western Heads East focuses on societal issues, economic empowerment, education and improving health and well being, this represents an opportunity for collaboration from within the institute. Introducing the probiotic program

in communities with women who had been affected by forced marriage highlights one possible avenue of collaboration. Although this may not be immediate, it provides an opportunity for faculty members working across disciplines to develop actionable approaches to furthering global development.

Additional Collaboration Opportunities

Across the institute there are several additional institute members that are making huge contributions to not only the Africa Institute but the continent itself. What is most notable about the Africa Institute is the diversity across disciplines of members and the collaboration opportunities that exist as a result. The greatest strength of the Africa Institute lies in the fact that it is comprised of a number of individuals that are passionate about conducting work in Africa. The collaboration luncheon held on November 22nd, 2016, provided an initial opportunity to bring together members of the institute. Discussions centered around the work they were doing, and as a means to highlight opportunities for collaboration, members presented their research in relation to the United Nations SDGs. The basis of this was to begin the conversation that will allow the institute to identify synergies to tackle the largest problems facing the continent.

While the Africa Institute represents a cross-disciplinary entity, there is a natural focus on the sciences due to the fact that the institute exists under the department of science. There are however, associated members working in arts and humanities, language studies, law and other disciplines that are not STEM focused. The Africa Institute

therefore, must work on promoting these areas of study to form partnership opportunities across all the disciplines. A common theme across all disciplines, is the educational aspect of the research being conducted. In Francophone studies, for example, by reflecting on language to build and understanding of culture and history, institute members can go beyond identifying solutions that deal solely with survival. Focusing on language gives the opportunity to enhance people's understanding and opens up collaboration opportunities through knowledge building of cultural heritage to reflect on a countries history as a means of enriching peoples lives now and in the future. This reflects the idea that while the institute has strengths that relate to some of the most pressing issues facing the continent such as health, education and poverty, there also exists opportunities to make achievements in the continent that go beyond basic survival. It also reflects a partnership opportunity to support experiential learning by combining cultural studies related to Francophone studies as a means to improve quality of life encompassed in the overall idea of improving health and well-being. There must however, be a focus within the institute to promote the diversity of work as a means to increase opportunities for different faculties to come together to reflect the true cross-disciplinary nature of the Africa Institute.

Across all disciplines faculty members are focused on capacity building. This ranges from anthropology and understanding the importance of environmental conservation to nursing and building capacity within African countries to improve quality of such institutions and programs. Holistically, a key discovery of the luncheon was the fact that education is a

strong base of the majority of the work that is being conducted across the institute. This highlights the opportunities to use Western University's educational resources to foster knowledge and skill building in an African context and the ability of the Africa Institute to do so. This aligns with the idea of knowledge translation and taking the research that is conducted not only across the institute as a whole.

How can Western synthesize the interdisciplinary research and understand intersections amongst the disciplines?

In order for Western to synthesize the interdisciplinary research and understand intersections amongst the disciplines, institute members need to be aware of the breadth of research that is being conducted. The Africa Institute has strengths in the fact that a variety of research is being conducted across faculties all pertaining to different topics to achieve different goals. Within these different areas of research, however, there are several opportunities to gain input and partner with individuals that may have otherwise not been considered had they been unaware of the research being conducted. It is vital, therefore, that Africa Institute set up a means to share and engage faculty across disciplines to share their work in its early stages to foster partnerships.

Although there are several strengths within the Africa Institute there are areas of improvement that will increase the organizations ability to achieve its goal. The luncheon event represented one of the first formal collaboration efforts that brought together faculty members across the institute. Although not all members were able to attend, it

represented the start of a conversation that if continued can result in partnerships that will be beneficial for both the institute and university. As previously highlighted, there are opportunities for faculty members to collaborate that will remain otherwise unknown if members are not brought together in settings to discuss their existing work and opportunities to further their research. As noted during the luncheon, more formal collaboration efforts are necessary and approaches towards facilitating collaboration need to be highlighted.

Linking the Africa Institute to the UN Sustainable Development Goals

How does Western University's research on Africa societies overlap with Global Goals passed by the UN in September 2015?

The 2030 agenda for sustainable development represents a list of integrated and indivisible goals across three areas of development – the economic, social and environmental. The goals relate to people, planet, prosperity and partnerships and are transformative in nature, aiming to make profound improvements across the planet. The goals recognize the need to help the worlds most vulnerable countries, particularly African countries. Similar to the work of the Africa Institute, the Sustainable Goals reflect the need for an integrated approach and recognize the interconnectedness and cross-cutting elements that exist across different elements of research and development.

Connecting Africa Institute Members Research to UN Sustainable Development Goals

Based on the luncheon activity – November 22nd, 2016

No Poverty	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Evolution of CIDA funded research and education project between Universities of Montreal and African Institutions – <i>Rod Beaujot</i> • Sustainable incomes to alleviate poverty and build dignity – <i>Irena Creed</i> • Participation in preparation of several national development plans for Botswana which cover over the long run goals – <i>Clark Leith</i>
Good Health and Well Being	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Children in northern Africa and women’s integrated health – <i>Gregor Reid</i> • Population based studies on chronic disease burden in African settings – <i>Saverio Stranges</i> • Reproduction health and family planning in Tunisia a survey of attitudes and practices – <i>Rod Beaujot</i> • Investigating the impacts on human health from the environment – <i>Phaedra Henley</i> • Reducing non communicable diseases by 1/3 by 2030 includes cancer and improving radiation therapy for cancer treatment – <i>Jake Van Dyk</i>
Quality Education	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Studied the evolution of Francophonie of which there are several strands (government summits, literature in French academia, publishing industry) – it evolves towards economic exchanges and conservation of minority cultures and languages and towards global rather than National literature – <i>Servanne Woodward</i> • Participation in doctoral training networks in population health, mentorship of several PHD students – <i>Saverio Stranges</i> • Strengthening of educational programs and skills development – <i>Isola Ajiferuke</i> • Internationalization, community-service learning, experiential learning, social justice in French studies – <i>Henri Boyi</i> • Literature and drama for Africa capture and address issues related to education, gender equality, and colonialism. Overall examine the role of literature in addressing the goals/ issues – <i>Nandi Bhatia</i> • Quality education responsible collaboration with Malagasy institutions and students – <i>Andrew Walsh</i> • Develop business case program and case teaching skills at Africa Universities – <i>Nicole Haggerty</i> • Discuss African writers with immigrant students from Africa in the redrawing of Francophonie – <i>Servanne Woodward</i> • Seminars at several universities in sub-Saharan Africa – <i>Kul Bhatia</i> • Teaching the SDG’s’ a systems approach to health (Global health systems program) – <i>Phaedra Henley</i>

Gender Equality	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Empower women and girls – <i>Helene Berman</i> • Investigation of gender disparities in health outcomes – <i>Saverio Stranges</i> • Empowering women to produce highly nutritious food in Africa – <i>Gregor Reid</i>
Clean Water and Sanitation	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Improved water quality and water security – <i>Irena Creed</i> • Evaluation of a water and sanitation project in the Bo region of Sierra Leone for IDRC – <i>Rod Beaujot</i>
Decent Work and Economic Growth	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Farmers and small community groups in Africa to make probiotic food – <i>Gregor Reid</i> • Deepen skills for entrepreneurship and problem solving to enable employment – <i>Nicole Haggerty</i>
Industry, innovation and infrastructure Reduced Inequalities	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Probiotics for Africa when the companies are not there – <i>Gregor Reid</i> • Research project, fisheries industry West Kenya – <i>Kul Bhatia</i>
Sustainable Cities and Communities	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Sustainable safe use of food resources – <i>Gregor Reid</i>
Responsible Consumption and Production	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Artisanal mining in Madagascar – <i>Andrew Walsh</i>
Climate Action	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Mitigate climate change impact – <i>Irena Creed</i>
Life Below Water	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Reducing environmental contamination of fish and the effort on humans – <i>Gregor Reid</i>
Life on Land	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Studies of the impact of environmental pollution (oil pollution) on health outcomes in Nigeria – <i>Saverio Stranges</i> • Forest management wetland restoration – <i>Irena Creed</i>
Peace, Justice and Strong Institutions	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Mitigation of conflict, courts, trade regulation, landmine removal – <i>Jim Freedman</i>
Partnerships for the Goals	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Creating partnerships across faculties – <i>Julie McMullin</i>

The work of the Africa Institute clearly spans across a range of SDGs. The interconnectedness of the SDGs displays the opportunities for the interdisciplinary nature of the Africa Institute to act as a forum by which to address the goals. Considering the

SDGs set a global agenda for development, they are a tool to measure the success of international development and the actionable work that is conducted by institute members.

The sustainable goals can be grouped in several ways, but regardless of the groupings, each goal is interrelated. As previously mentioned, within the Africa Institute, several members engage in capacity building across different areas of work. The education based nature of the work conducted across disciplines creates a link across the global goals in terms of improving knowledge and capabilities within different institutions. Considering the global focus on the SDGs, the Africa Institutes ability to showcase its work across the goals represents a platform by which Western University can present its interdisciplinary strengths relating to Africa.

Actionable Programs

Alongside the research within the Africa Institute, there are several programs that focus on experiential learning and mobilization of both Western and African students. The different programs span across the continent and throughout the disciplines represented in the institute. The diverse range of existing programs indicate the knowledge translation that has already taken place in which faculty members have been able to turn their research into practical uses that have mobilized students and and contributed to Western University's global learning initiative.

The following are a few examples of specialization and research that has transformed into actionable programs:

1. Henri Boyi's course within the Department of French Studies is an interdisciplinary experiential learning course giving students the opportunity to learn about Rwandan society in a social and cultural setting while immersing themselves in an international community. It is based off a partnership with the Kigali Health Institute located in the country's capital.
2. Dr. Andrew Walsh and Dr. Ian Calhoun's research in Madagascar led to the development of a Field Course in Environmental Anthropology in which students get hands on experience focusing on conservation and development issues in the region. This course creates partnerships between Western and Malagasy students and gives them an option to collaborate with one another. What started as a teaching project to research has transformed into a method in which student's from different backgrounds can be involved and contribute to the research taking place. At the heart of this program is ongoing long-term relationships with countries and institutions that make this partnership possible.
3. As previously mentioned, Western Heads East has been able to take the work of Gregor Reid and Sharareh Hekmat to create a program where students travel to African countries for three month internships to help facilitate the delivery of probiotic

yogurt. Although this program has experienced complications with the actual delivery of the probiotic, it has allowed a number of students to participate in an interdisciplinary learning experience that has allowed them to gain first hand experience working in these countries.

4. Nicole Haggerty's Africa Service Learning course provides Ivey Business School students the opportunity to travel to universities across Africa and share their specialized knowledge in case based learning. As one of the few business schools in the world that has a strong focus on case based learning, Ivey students have a unique skill set. This gives them the opportunity to engage themselves, as well as the African students at partnered universities in an mutually beneficial learning experience.

What top three programs can be pursued in terms of interdisciplinary grants?

The actionable programs mentioned showcase the fact that Western's strengths do not lie within specific programs but within faculty member's ability to turn their research into mobilization programs and partnership opportunities. The strength of the Africa Institute lies in the dedication of the faculty members and strength of the programs lie in the fact that the Africa Institute is one of the few bodies on campus that continuously engages in the idea of trans-disciplinary and interdisciplinary work. While Western and the Africa Institute do have particular strengths that relate to Global Goals involving health and well being and education, the interconnectedness of these goals reflects the

opportunities for faculty members across disciplines to come together in a knowledge translation effort that helps pursue actionable solutions towards international development. Opportunities exist for faculty members to come together, particularly around the education focus of most initiatives, to engage institute members in different programs and areas of research.

To what degree could the Africa Service Learning course be a platform for research and collaboration with other parties on campus?

The Africa Service Learning program does an excellent job in giving Ivey students an opportunity to reflect on the skills they have built while in the program and share it with students who do not have a case based curriculum. The case writing aspect of the course provides an additional opportunity for Ivey students to improve their competencies in the area and also represents an opportunity for partnerships with other parties on campus.

One partnership in particular that could contribute to the Africa Institute is between Africa Service Learning and Western Heads East. The problems that Western Heads East is currently facing could be well encompassed in an Africa-based business case that allows students to explore the bureaucratic and distribution issues. In this particular partnership, Africa Service Learning students could gain experience in business case writing while finding solutions for Western Heads East and getting students opinions who live in the areas the program takes place. Furthermore, students in this course can

try to look into case writing involving health, governmental and educational institutions while sharing this knowledge with Africa Institute members doing work in those areas.

Conclusion

Western's Africa Institute has seen many successes over the past few years and the increasing global focus of Western University will allow this to continue. While the institute does have many strengths, in order to support its collaborative nature, there needs to be a stronger focus on bringing institute members together on a regular basis to share their current research. In doing so, members will be able to find opportunities for partnerships and use their individual strengths to contribute to successful interdisciplinary research initiatives.