

# The Global Marginalisation of the African Academy from an African Perspective

*Charles Ogeno calls for an expansion in capacity-building programmes as a way of addressing the resource inequality which is at the heart of the decolonising the academy debates.*

***This article is part of the #PublicAuthority blog series, part of the ESRC-funded [Centre for Public Authority and International Development](#).***

With a theme of “Shifting Boundaries and Knowledge Production,” the *Africa in the World* conference that took place in Johannesburg from 25-28 May 2018, sought to answer [key questions of contemporary African scholarship](#). These included whether “Europhone” intellectuals produce the “best” knowledge on Africa, and who can speak most authoritatively about Africa’s successes and failures. Organised in partnership between the American Anthropological Association (AAA), the African Studies Association (ASA), and a variety of [local and regional partners](#), attempts at answering these questions immediately led to debates about decolonisation within the academy.



Young scholars in the postgraduate reading room at the University of Ibadan Image Credit: [Michael Sean Gallagher via Flickr](#) CC BY-SA 2.0

Given the historical processes that have shaped and are still shaping the continent, *Africa in the World* aimed at starting a global conversation about African concerns. This conference brought together more than 200 academics from across the globe to exchange scholarly work about unlocking and promoting Africa knowledge production. The large number of attendees shows how such events can be the foundation for academic partnerships between African and overseas institutions. For example, through its Presidential Fellows Programme, and in partnership with the African Humanity Program, ASA encourages Africa-based scholars to attend their Annual Meeting and spend time within the US-based African Studies Programme.

Keynote speaker and Executive Director of ASA, Suzanne Moyer Baazet, highlighted that although Africans in the diaspora are increasingly involved in ASA, the body would like more Africa-based involvement in the future. Involving Africans at an international level is particularly important for providing the space and opportunities to allow African scholars to exercise their knowledge and rights while also building on their experience. Engaging and providing opportunities for scholars in Africa is the minimum requirement to take forward current debates about decolonising the academy. Decolonising the academy is not an event but a process; it will not only be difficult to achieve but it will also likely take significant time. In my experience, one of the most pressing current concerns is not necessarily decolonising education itself, but rather to focus on up-skilling up-and-coming, non-elite African researchers to supplement their skills and experiences with the [best academic values, beliefs, and habits](#), whether African or international in origin. Initiating truly collaborative partnerships between African and non-African institutions and scholars therefore becomes an important starting point, setting the foundation for future decolonisation by building on the strengths and capacities of institutions and individuals everywhere and at all levels.

More importantly, *Africa in the World* provided a powerful platform for African scholars to voice their ambitions toward decolonising the academy at both international and a continental level. Although some scholars have started to rethink the biases of [current academic representation](#), recognition of knowledge produced in Africa by Africans has generally been minimal until very recently. Decolonisation of the academy involves not only transforming curriculum and pedagogy but also creating space for the [internationalisation of local experiences](#). This means encouraging non-Western scholars to highlight and share the issues, struggles, and challenges they face in accessing global spaces on an equal footing.

Although the African dimensions of this debate may eventually produce some positives for Africa-based academic development, it will be extremely challenging to achieve this without international support. If we are talking about decolonisation from within, we should think about building a robust bridge to connect the different strengths of not only African and non-African academics, but also African and non-African institutions. Such support would have to be in the form of equal partnerships committed to practicing real change, rather than simply talking about the idea of academic equality or applying a top-down, Eurocentric idea of capacity building.

Such ideas about the importance of institutional and personal partnerships are embedded in some of the current research being undertaken through LSE's [Firoz Lalji Centre for Africa \(FLCA\)](#), in which I myself am involved. These research projects seek to address current academic inequalities by redefining institutional and working arrangements while strengthening the capacities of the upcoming Africa-based researchers to whom they are connected. For example, this has been done through the inclusion of local partners in all stages of research, from planning and conducting fieldwork to analysing, writing up, and presenting results. As many African academic institutions or states seemingly have limited capacity or will to finance and support the types of partnerships which academic decolonisation currently requires, Western institutions may need to make such changes themselves, temporarily stepping into the existing institutional and resource gaps before any real change can take place in the short term.

This is because decolonising African academia primarily requires building the capacity of Africa-based institutions and individuals. For example, my excitement at the opportunity to do a presentation at the *Africa in the World* conference was tempered by a lack of funds to make the trip. It was therefore a huge relief when, just days before the payment deadline, the Firoz Lalji Centre for Africa generously provided the necessary funds.

Attending *Africa in the World* was extremely rewarding, helping to build my existing capacities by providing me with an opportunity to gain professional academic experience. In addition to the chance of networking and building important relationships with scholars from a variety of different backgrounds and experience, the conference allowed me an opportunity to present my research to an engaged audience. The audience's participation not only inspired me to take my research ideas further but their questions and comments encouraged me in my current objectives and gave me ideas about future research directions. Finally, simply being present in South Africa felt good; as it reminded me I was able to find the financial support needed to attend my first large conference.

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Resource inequality is possibly the single biggest issue facing current efforts at academic decolonisation. Financial inequality has been shrinking space for the equal participation of local scholars across the globe for decades now, despite an increase in discussions about decolonising the academy. A real commitment to academic decolonisation therefore needs to strive for a much more equitable distribution of money. One way this could be done is by academic institutions and funding bodies devoting greater portions of their budgets to building the capacities of marginalised scholars in the global 'north' as well as the 'south'. This requires direct financing events relating to the scholarly development of up-and-coming researchers from all countries and every background. For me, securing funding to attend the *Africa in the World* conference represents the first step towards more equal academic engagement. The more capacity-building programmes there are, the more career development opportunities there are for emerging researchers like myself.

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**The views expressed in this post are those of the author and in no way reflect those of the Africa at LSE blog, the Firoz Lalji Centre for Africa or the London School of Economics and Political Science.**