

RECOMMENDATIONS FOR

Reinvigorating the Humanities in Africa

SUBMITTED BY

**The Forum on the Humanities in Africa
of the African Humanities Program**

UNIVERSITY OF SOUTH AFRICA

JUNE 7, 2014

FOR CONSIDERATION BY

The African Higher Education Summit

DAKAR, SENEGAL

MARCH 10–12, 2015

RELEASED ON DECEMBER 5, 2014

http://www.acls.org/Publications/Programs/Reinvigorating_the_Humanities_in_Africa.pdf



AFRICAN
HUMANITIES
PROGRAM

Forum on the Humanities in Africa

June 7, 2014

The African Humanities Program, an initiative supported by the Carnegie Corporation of New York and administered by the American Council of Learned Societies, convened a Humanities Forum on June 7, 2014 at the University of South Africa to prepare recommendations for the African Higher Education Summit.

At the AHP/Unisa forum, leading academics on the continent assessed the consequences of the marginalization of the humanities and offered suggestions to reverse this trend. The result of their deliberations, the **Recommendations for Reinvigorating the Humanities in Africa**, summarizes the state of the humanities in Africa and presents recommendations to national and higher education policymakers attending the African Higher Education Summit.



African Higher Education Summit

March 10–12, 2015

The African Higher Education Summit, March 10–12, 2015, convened by TrustAfrica in Dakar, Senegal, is planned as a three-day event with the theme “revitalizing higher education for Africa’s future.” The Summit seeks to build a movement of like-minded institutions to transform the African higher education sector.

Its objectives are to:

1. Build a constituency for transformation and investment in Africa’s higher education.
2. Create a shared vision for the future of African higher education.
3. Harness and highlight exemplary efforts and initiatives in African higher education.
4. Harness disparate efforts and interventions in African higher education.
5. Spur and sustain innovation in African higher education.

Summary Recommendations

In today's landscape of higher education and research in Africa, the humanities find themselves in a parlous state. Studies of literature, history, languages, cultures, philosophy, the arts, and other humanities subjects have been deprioritized by policymakers and even by some university officials. The humanities consistently appear at the bottom of any list of national goals, if indeed they appear at all.

It is clear that the marginalization of the humanities must be remedied, because no knowledge-led development strategy can succeed without a solid core of humanistic understanding and humane values. To envision the future, we must understand the lessons of the past. To act in the present, we must be sensitive to current cultural complexities.

Reinvigorating the humanities, then, is a necessary first step for inspiring innovation in all fields of endeavor critical to development, such as the prudent, ethical management of natural resources and civic dialogue in the public sphere.

Recommendations of African humanities scholars to national and higher education policymakers:

- ▶ **Value the concrete contributions** of history, languages, culture, the arts, and other humanities disciplines as an essential component of a comprehensive system of higher education for the betterment of the nation and continent.
- ▶ Ensure meeting the goals of higher education through **robust funding, with attention to needs of humanities scholars, students, departments, and institutes.**
- ▶ **Set high standards for doctoral education**, focusing as much on quality as on numbers, not discriminating against humanities doctoral candidates, their supervisors, and departmental mentors.
- ▶ **Recognize the value of research** to the nation and its centrality to a vibrant higher education system; include the production of new knowledge through humanities research in funding programs.
- ▶ **Actively encourage participation in national policy debates by humanities scholars**, along with those in other disciplines.
- ▶ **Require that higher education institutions make decisions on promotions and funding for research and travel based on performance and merit**, without discriminating against humanities scholars.
- ▶ **Ensure that laws affecting intellectual property encourage knowledge access and dissemination**, and that policies encourage maximum visibility of local scholarship (e.g., support for national repositories), incorporating a focus on humanities scholarship in all initiatives.

The Place of the Humanities in National Life

It would seem that the study of the cultural achievements that make us human should hold pride of place in every national system of higher education and research. Nations justifiably look to their universities for the education of future citizens and leaders, and for the production of knowledge necessary for growth, security, and prosperity. A university's core mission is rooted in the humanities—in the study of culture, history, language, literature, anthropology, philosophy, religion, and the arts. They constitute our common heritage.

The humanistic disciplines have a clear practical value: they teach critical and analytic thinking while at the same time stimulating the imagination and promoting ethical values. Leaders need these skills to lead, to identify problems, and to conceive creative solutions. Citizens need them to participate actively in public life.

Yet the key contribution of the humanities goes beyond cultural education and training in analytic skills. Humanistic studies help ground national dialogue on urgent issues in enduring humane values. Technical and technological solutions today raise ethical questions that require public understanding and public debate. Humanities research and teaching illuminate the ethical principles that frame the discussion and provide examples of objectivity and fairness in dialogue.

In today's landscape of higher education and research in Africa, however, the humanities find themselves in a parlous state. Studies of humanistic subjects have been deprioritized. They have been relegated by policymakers, and even by some university officials, to the bottom of any list of national goals, if they appear at all.

The marginalization of the humanities must be remedied, because every knowledge-led development strategy must have a solid humanities core. To envision the future, we need to understand the lessons of the past. To act in the present, we must be sensitive to current cultural complexities.

Reinvigorating the humanities is therefore indispensable to any strategy for development. It requires a concerted, carefully targeted effort by a broad range of agencies and actors:

- ▶ to provide the material conditions for the proper function of the academic sector,
- ▶ to innovate and refresh academic cultures, and
- ▶ to reform entrenched, out of date practices.

A Brief for the Humanities

The African Humanities Program, an initiative supported financially by the Carnegie Corporation of New York and administered by the American Council of Learned Societies, convened a Humanities Forum on June 7, 2014 at the University of South Africa. Leading academics on the continent assessed the consequences of the marginalization of the humanities and offered suggestions to reverse this trend.

Recommendations were of two kinds. The first, addressed to members of the humanities community, were recommendations for actions to be taken immediately (without the need for external funding) by individuals, departments, and cross-institutional networks. The second, directed to international stakeholders and national governments, were suggestions for policy and for medium and long term investments of resources.

The Humanities Forum identified several fields of action:

- ▶ Assuring the Proper Conditions of Work for the Academic Sector
 - ▶ Strengthening Ph.D. Programs
 - ▶ Improving Mentorship
 - ▶ Nurturing a Culture of Research and Teaching
 - ▶ Curtailing the Culture and Practice of Consultancies
 - ▶ Developing Effective Mechanisms for Dissemination of New Knowledge
 - ▶ Encouraging Academics to Participate Actively in the Public Sphere
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To achieve the objectives detailed below, the community of humanities academics on the continent should take appropriate action at universities and public fora, in partnership with the stakeholders represented at the continent-wide summit on higher education in Dakar in 2015:

- ▶ national officials and policymakers
- ▶ universities, colleges, and departments
- ▶ international foundations, networks, and NGOs.

Each of these partners has a distinctive role to play.

Leadership by national stakeholders is essential. They can identify the invigoration of the humanities sector as a national development goal, thereby calling universities and academics to action. They can also lead with financial support for reform efforts.

Universities, colleges of humanities and arts, and departments in humanities disciplines can respond to the call by instituting structural changes and by offering incentives to individuals.

International foundations and NGOs can suggest improvements in procedures, practices, and philosophies of education and research, mindful that solutions should not simply be imposed from above or transferred from other world areas.

While stakeholders can set broad goals and back them with financial incentives, and institutions can provide the framework for efforts to re-calibrate practices, success depends on effective, concerted action by humanities academics. It is the commitment of individuals, working singly and within networks and voluntary associations, which will innovate and re-shape the academic culture. Individuals will inject new energy into Ph.D. training, mentoring, and dissemination.

Steps taken by individuals, informal networks, and departments will bring immediate local benefits, provide models to be emulated, and encourage funders to support their expansion.

Some Positive Examples

Examples of positive individual effort and local self-organization may be seen in the experience of the African Humanities Program (AHP), which has organized annual competitions for fellowships since 2008. An external intervention (fellowships, book subventions, and a peer-review process supported by a U.S. foundation) has catalyzed a number of independent, local initiatives aimed at strengthening Ph.D. training and research.

Some independently organized initiatives have expanded the reach of the AHP, publicizing its benefits to wider circles of African scholars. For example, a number of competition “launches” are convened every year at African universities with the assistance of AHP peer reviewers and senior advisers. The launch meetings offer workshops in preparation of applications and a forum for collegial assessment of work in progress by AHP Fellows.

In addition, new associations in the humanities have emerged alongside AHP activities, in its spirit and with its reviewers and advisers in important roles. One such group is the Network of Nigerian Historians, a voluntary, cross-institutional initiative for exchange of information on new methodologies and new practices in research and Ph.D. training. Another is the Nigerian Humanities Society, under the leadership of several AHP peer reviewers. The African Humanities Forum, based at Ahmadu Bello University in Zaria, Nigeria, holds two to three meetings a year at which senior academics mentor younger colleagues and lead workshops on academic proposal writing. The African Studies Association of Africa, established in Ghana in 2014, has been formed in response to official African Studies organizations in the United States and Europe. The ASAA plans to forge networks on the continent and to hold international conferences across Africa with the broader aim of increasing Africa’s share of academic output in the global body of studies on Africa. Participants in these organizations appreciate their interdisciplinarity, their international character (bringing together academics from countries on the continent), and their flexibility in sharing best practices.

Individuals who met at international AHP meetings or residencies have organized international conferences at their universities. In 2012, three AHP Fellows (one from Nigeria, one from Tanzania, and one from Ghana) in residence at the University of the Western Cape, South Africa, planned a conference on the relation of Anglophone to Francophone scholarship. The resulting West Africa Comparative Research Conference was held to great acclaim in Porto-Novo, Benin later in the same year.

Assuring the Proper Conditions of Work for the Academic Sector

Stakeholders must move decisively to redress the global inequality of conditions of work. African academics cannot compete on an equal footing with their counterparts in other parts of the world as long as power outages, weak accessibility of Internet service, inadequate library facilities, and sub-par dormitories continue to handicap African higher education. While these hardships affect all disciplines, university officials and national policymakers should assure that the needs of humanities researchers, teachers, and students not be neglected. African academics deserve a level playing field as they compete in the world mainstream of knowledge production.

▶ **Calls for applications for research grants should explicitly welcome humanities submissions.**

In open calls, all fields of study should be included with no discrimination against the humanities. In competitions designated primarily for the natural sciences and disciplines focused directly on development or security (e.g., environmental protection, sustainability of agriculture, conflict resolution, etc.), cross-disciplinary projects should be solicited, as appropriate, including those with humanistic components. Finally, there should be grant competitions designed explicitly for fundamental research in the humanities.

▶ **The critically important goal of increasing the number of Ph.D.s should not be reduced to chasing after numerical targets. The objective is to increase the number of *high quality* Ph.D.s.** There is a need, then, to set standards for curriculum, for training, and for dissertation research and writing. [See the recommendations for [Strengthening Ph.D. Programs](#) and [Improving Mentorship](#).]

▶ **External funding** (from international agencies, national governments, and independent foundations) for humanities departments and individual academics **should be designed to incentivize structural reform and to improve practices.** It should identify and reward success in each field of action described in the sections below.

Strengthening Ph.D. Programs

An excellent point of entry to reinvigorating the academic sector would be a review of Ph.D. training of the next generation, who will lead African universities and nations in the twenty-first century. Ph.D. programs should adopt a model of comprehensive training, moving beyond the predominant practice of the Ph.D. candidate working almost exclusively with one supervisor to produce the dissertation. Comprehensive training may include:

- ▶ **Coursework that goes beyond disciplinary subjects** to address learning how to learn and developing good habits of study and research
- ▶ **Training in research methods**
- ▶ **Workshops in academic writing** and book-manuscript preparation
- ▶ **Language training** (many essential topics, such as German colonization, are under-researched because of the language barrier)
- ▶ **Insistence that students read broadly.** They need to be current in the world literature on their topic, but also in adjacent fields. Especially worthwhile are reading seminars for intensive, collective examination of texts. Locally-organized seminars can be held within departments at no cost; grants will encourage and enable participation from other universities and other countries. Libraries and online access to literature must be up to date and well-functioning.
- ▶ **Exposure of Ph.D. candidates to continental and worldwide scholarship.** Currently, African researchers tend to concentrate on specific localities, in many cases ones with which the researcher is already familiar. In order that conceptualizations and approaches not remain parochial, local studies need to be contextualized. Researchers must enter the broader African and global dialogue on similar topics with innovative approaches and methodologies.
- ▶ **Providing travel grants** to researchers who pursue comparative aspects of their local studies, or whose subjects lie entirely outside their own countries.
- ▶ **Encouraging and augmenting time released from teaching for postdoctoral appointments and sabbaticals.** Scholars will be better teachers if their research is active and continuing.
- ▶ **Making leave time more productive through residencies for writing outside the home university.** The African Humanities Program's residencies, offered to every Fellow during the fellowship year, have shown that scholars are more productive in completing manuscripts at centers for advanced study. Heavy teaching responsibilities handicap African scholars in comparison with their counterparts in other world areas, where grants for release time are easier to obtain. Moreover, at centers for advanced study, scholars have the opportunity to enrich their projects with input from colleagues.
- ▶ **Invigorating humanities education prior to the Ph.D.** Curricula for university students, secondary, and even primary school pupils may not only provide basic information but also enkindle the desire to pursue research in the humanities.

Improving Mentorship

The master-apprentice relationship, deeply imbedded in academic culture, has been weakened in African universities, because senior scholars feel pressed to do work valued as more productive such as preparing academic publications for promotion or taking paid consultancies. Mentorship needs to return to the center of the academic enterprise. It should not be the exclusive province of the dissertation supervisor, but should embrace wider circles of senior scholars as well as peers. Reconfiguring mentorship will support new practices in Ph.D. training and bring benefits to mentors as well as to their mentees.

- ▶ **Develop new opportunities for informal mentoring.** Traditional forms, such as departmental advising and Ph.D. supervision, should be supplemented by informal contact between senior and junior scholars and among peers, for example, at departmental reading circles organized to discuss the strengths and weaknesses of young academics' research and writing. Incentives, such as grants and prizes, will focus attention on improving the content of advice in both traditional and informal settings.
- ▶ **Establish high standards.** Mentoring is not parenting. The relationship should not lead to dependency on one senior, parental figure. Diversification of the sources of advice by the addition of informal but structured contacts will benefit all concerned. Experienced mentors should lead discussions of the ethics of the process.
- ▶ **Underscore the benefits to advisers.** Commenting on others' work, especially in seminar settings, sharpens the mentor's own skills in research management (how to formulate a research question, how to choose the most appropriate approach to investigating it) and editing (how to restructure a text so that the argument becomes clear and compelling). Growth in these skills will, of course, lead to the improvement of the mentor's own research and writing.
- ▶ **Dissertation supervisors will gain valuable experience** observing the effects of mentoring on their own and others' supervisees, and from discussion with other mentors.
- ▶ **Engage retired scholars and the diaspora.** The broad background of retired academics is a clear advantage for feedback to early career scholars, providing, of course, that senior scholars are ready to engage with new technologies and disciplinary approaches. Diaspora scholars bring to the discussion their cross-cutting experiences in other academic cultures.
- ▶ **Create seminars for collegial manuscript development.** Workshops for discussing research and writing in retreat-like settings will involve mentoring, but they may go beyond it in innovative ways. Grants can support intensive seminars, modeled on the "Factory of ideas" (a month-long sequence of encounters between senior scholars and selected junior scholars for generating ideas and approaches to research), "Early career seminars" (weekend meetings for graduate students just before or after the Ph.D. to discuss work in progress), or "Manuscript development workshops" (weeklong seminar sessions for reading and critiquing participants' work in a collegial setting).

Departments may adapt versions of any of these models, or develop new ones, to organize lunchtime presentations or weekend retreats for their own students, perhaps with participation of senior scholars from other universities.

Nuturing a Culture of Research and Teaching

- ▶ **Create networks of collaboration.** Working groups for discussion of interdisciplinary topics, new analytical approaches, and staff development already exist in university departments and interdepartmental programs. They take place without additional funding and counter the isolationism that can develop within academic departments. Informal dissertation- article- or manuscript-writing groups meet on a regular basis to discuss works in progress and provide much needed support and perspective. Single-credit graduate courses, allowing all students and faculty to sit in, generate exchange of ideas and development of collaboration across disciplines and levels of expertise. Weekly mentorship seminars allow students to share their works-in-progress with faculty members, peers, and rotating senior scholar speakers.

Carefully targeted incentives in the form of prizes or travel grants will expand the reach of such initiatives to other universities and across international/intercontinental borders. Incentives in the form of prizes for best practices will help stimulate such outreach. Funding for travel to conferences by Ph.D. candidates and early career academics will enable cooperation to flourish.

- ▶ **Actively engage Ph.D. candidates,** especially in reading groups. Graduate students can broaden their horizons and hone their capacities by cooperating with peers in working groups.
- ▶ **Use Skype and new text-sharing media** to continue relationships made at conferences and workshops.
- ▶ **Promote mobility across institutions and borders for teaching as well as research** by scholars at all ranks. This will enable cross-fertilization of ideas, and a sharing of norms and standards, energizing efforts at reform.
- ▶ **Envision these efforts as the green shoots of a civil society in the academic community.** Academics have two loyalties, two professional interests. The first is vertical—to their employing institutions (up to superiors and down to junior colleagues and students). The second is horizontal—an interest in communicating with colleagues at other institutions and in other countries on disciplinary and research matters. Universities support vertical contacts. Horizontal relationships, much more difficult to sustain, must grow organically, beginning with informal contacts such as working groups on specific topics that cross institutions. Such interactions help seed voluntary associations and other stable platforms for collegial interchange. The Network of Nigerian Historians formed this way.

Curtailing the Culture and Practice of Consultancies

African academics are deeply committed to the social value of their scholarship and teaching. They want to contribute meaningfully to national development goals. Is paid consulting work for governmental and non-governmental agencies a way to show this commitment in practice? In some cases, it might be.

Nevertheless, there is no question that a pervasive consultancy culture has undermined serious scholarship and, in extreme cases, has even violated ethical standards. As professors are promoted to senior positions, their rate of academic publication seems to fall, while the number of their paid consultancies seems to rise. Mentoring and other services to the academic community look much less attractive than consulting, because they pay much less, if anything at all.

Moreover, consulting often takes scholars to different literature(s) and away from keeping up to date on core knowledge in the subjects they are teaching and that are the basis for advising the next generation.

- ▶ International stakeholders and national governments should **reaffirm the core value of basic and applied research *within* university departments** by ensuring respectable remuneration and establishing national research councils that do not discriminate against the humanities. Meager university salaries and lack of research support make paid consultancies outside the university all but irresistible. Many academics will be drawn to them, to the detriment of their research, teaching, and mentoring.
- ▶ **Significant external financial support for collaborative groups and voluntary associations** will signal the value of academic network-building and counteract the lure of lucrative consultancies.
- ▶ **Universities and departments should adopt clear policies setting limits on the time staff can devote to paid non-academic work.** At present, policies provide perverse incentives for staff to take consultancies (often by setting up university offices to act as clearinghouses for consulting opportunities), because public work demonstrates the university's service to society and because it provides welcome income in the form of supplements for staff and administrative overhead.

Enunciating clear principles of what constitutes an academic's contribution to society and how this should be integrated with, or separated from, fundamental responsibilities of staff, will clear the air for many academics who are well-intentioned in their commitment to the university mission but unsure whether consulting helps or hinders it. Draft policy statements should be discussed at universities and in departments prior to their implementation to improve formulation of policies and to help ensure their positive acceptance by staff.

Developing Effective Mechanisms for Dissemination of New Knowledge

Academic publishing of books and journals in Africa is caught in a scissors of citation. Publishers and journals in Africa struggle to gain recognition in the international marketplace of ideas (and on the world commercial book market). However, authors who publish in African journals are rarely cited outside of the continent. For this reason, authors are urged by their universities, and by their own career ambitions, to publish in world venues for greater visibility and prestige. This impoverishes the pool of high quality submissions to African publications, making them even less citable. In order to thrive, as well as to raise its profile worldwide, the humanities community in Africa needs to re-energize and modernize its current mechanisms for dissemination of new knowledge.

- ▶ **Move to blunt the scissors of citation by a variety of strategies the African academic community can enact on its own.** African scholars should cite one another, especially in off-continent publications. Colleagues off-continent (African scholars as well as scholars of Africa) should cite scholarship published in Africa.
- ▶ **Use online journals, blogs, websites, and other electronic media** to make African academics, and their scholarship, more widely known.
- ▶ **Create an online repository for new work being produced.** This will require investment to establish an editorial infrastructure (a management board, a peer-review process for manuscript selection, and librarians for cataloguing) and an Internet-technology infrastructure (servers, software, maintenance). The repository could be designated for work in progress at advanced stages—dissertations, conference presentations, working papers.

The repository might “pre-publish” works in progress to make them available to the worldwide academic community and in the public sphere. One possible catalogue within a larger repository could be devoted to local studies, empirically rich monographs of specific locations as well as local traditions, customs, and practices.

Encouraging Academics to Participate Actively in The Public Sphere

Academics acting as public intellectuals are already prominent in the public sphere. Several cases may be cited, primarily novelists and poets, who have seized the imaginations of their countrymen (and who, as a result, were themselves sometimes seized and jailed by the authoritarian state).

A vital argument for reinvigorating the humanities in higher education and research is the positive role humanistic knowledge can play in public life. Although not every scholar can be a Wole Soyinka or Ngũgĩ wa Thiong’o, every scholar should be concerned about the level and accuracy of historical knowledge in public debate, about the quality and integrity of political rhetoric in the media, and about the civility of public discourse.

Put another way, although academics have the right to express political opinions, this is not the main way for the humanities to make an impact in the public sphere. The unique humanistic contribution is to supply historical knowledge and cultural sensitivity, and to model honest and civil debate, even if the debate is contentious. Especially if it is contentious.

A humanistic perspective is therefore a necessary precondition for a vibrant civic life. When present, it is invisible, like the air we breathe. How much we depend on it only becomes evident when authoritarian measures threaten to cut off the oxygen supply. It is the calling of the humanities community not to preach, but to practice, humane values, creativity, and a commitment to historical and cultural understanding.

- ▶ **Universities and research institutions can take the lead by making their websites more informative about their staff**, about the scholarship staff have produced, and about its potential relevance to development goals.
- ▶ **The question of popularization must be faced squarely.** To write in a way that is accessible, even beckoning, to the broad educated public, should not dilute the fundamental research that is the mission of the university. How this works in practice will vary widely. Scholars should not structure their research to satisfy public tastes, but at least some of the presentation of the findings, and an exploration of their implications, can certainly be delivered in a popular or journalistic style in book reviews, film reviews, workshops with artists, and televised discussions.
- ▶ **Scholars may wish to develop relationships with NGOs** for public forums and other academic-public partnerships. This needs to be done carefully, because paid consultancies are one form of such a relationship.

Participants

Dr. Rafatu Abdulhamid
Lecturer, Philosophy & Religions (AHP Fellow)
University of Abuja, Nigeria

Professor Jimi Adesina
SARChI Chair in Social Policy
Archie Mafeje Research Institute
Unisa, South Africa

Dr. Esther Afreh
Lecturer, English (AHP Fellow)
Kwame Nkrumah University of Science
and Technology, Ghana

Professor Adigun Agbaje
Professor, Political Sciences
University of Ibadan, Nigeria

Professor Akosua Adomako Ampofo
Director, Institute of African Studies
University of Ghana

Professor Kofi Anyidoho
Senior Lecturer, Literature
English Department
University of Ghana

Ms. Nasima Badsha
Chief Executive Officer
Cape Higher Education Consortium, South Africa

Emeritus Professor Sandra Barnes
Professor, Anthropology
University of Pennsylvania, USA

Dr. De-Valera Botchway
Lecturer, History (AHP Fellow)
University of Cape Coast, Ghana

Ms. Eszter Csicsai
Program Coordinator, AHP
American Council of Learned Societies, USA

Dr. Dominica Dipio
Head, Department of Literature
(African Humanities Series author)
College of Humanities & Social Sciences
Makerere University, Uganda

Dr. Omano Edigheji
Consultant
Trust Africa

Dr. Sule Emmanuel Egya
Associate Professor, Department of English
(African Humanities Series author)
Ibrahim Badamasi Babangida University, Nigeria

Professor Patricia Hayes
Professor, Department of History
University of the Western Cape, South Africa

Professor Fred Hendricks
Dean of Humanities
Rhodes University, South Africa

Professor John Higgins Professor
Ardeme Chair in Literature, Department of English
Language & Literature
University of Cape Town, South Africa

Dr. Eunice Ibekwe
Lecturer, Music (AHP Fellow)
Nnamdi Azikiwe University, Nigeria

Professor Wilfred Lajul
Chair, Department of Philosophy & Development Studies
College of Humanities & Social Sciences
Makerere University, Uganda

Dr. Abubakar Aliyu Liman
Lecturer, English & Literature Studies (AHP Fellow)
Ahmadu Bello University, Nigeria

Dr. Pinky Makoe
Department of English Studies
Unisa, South Africa

Participants (continued)

Dr. Herbert Makoye
Dean, School of Journalism &
Mass Communication
University of Dar es Salaam, Tanzania

Professor Bertram Mapunda
Principal, College of Humanities
University of Dar es Salaam, Tanzania

Professor Kgomotso Masemola
Department of English Studies
Unisa, South Africa

Dr. Gerald Mazarire
Lecturer, History & International Studies
(AHP Fellow)
Stellenbosch University, South Africa

Professor Sabelo Ndlovu-Gatsheni
Head, Archie Mafeje Research Institute
Unisa, South Africa

Professor Francis Nyamnjoh
Head, Department of Social Anthropology
University of Cape Town, South Africa

Professor Okello Ogwang
Deputy Vice Chancellor (Academic)
Makerere University, Uganda

Professor Andries Oliphant
Head, Theory of Literature,
Department of Literature
Unisa, South Africa

Dr. Samuel Oloruntoba
Post Doctoral Fellow
Thabo Mbeki African Leadership Institute
Unisa, South Africa

Professor Innocent Pikirayi
Head, Department of Anthropology
and Archaeology,
University of Pretoria, South Africa

Dr. Jordan Rengshwat
Lecturer, Historical Theology (AHP Fellow)
Theological College of Northern Nigeria

Associate Professor Josephat Rugemalira
Senior Lecturer, Department Foreign
Languages & Linguistics
University of Dar es Salaam, Tanzania

Professor Aili Tripp
Professor, Political Science and Gender &
Women Studies
University of Wisconsin-Madison, USA

Dr. Andrzej Tymowski
Director, International Programs
American Council of Learned Societies, USA

Dr. Tracie Utoh-Ezeajugh
Director, Centre for Excellence in the
Arts & Humanities (AHP Fellow)
Nnamdi Azikiwe University, Nigeria

Dr. Edward Wamala
Head, Department of Philosophy &
Development Studies
College of Humanities & Social Sciences
Makerere University, Uganda

Professor Kwesi Yankah
Principal
Central University College of Ghana

Emeritus Professor Bahru Zewde
Executive Director, Forum for Social Studies
Department of History
University of Addis Ababa, Ethiopia

Dr. Siphmandla Zondi
Honorary Professor of Politics and
Development Studies
Institute for Global Dialogue associated
with Unisa, South Africa