

Cultural Issues related to HEI Administration and Hierarchy : An African Case Study

There is an enormous diversity of cultures within the African continent

This has considerable implications for the management of all the infrastructural systems that make up a society

Including the systems that run African Higher Education Institutions (HEIs)

We will look at some of the reasons why humans misunderstand each other so often. Even two English-speaking countries have different cultures and use their English in different ways

USHEPiA

*University Science, Humanities and Engineering
Partnerships in Africa*

**Is a Programme that was developed at the
initiative of UCT in the early 1990s**

**To promote co-operation among selected
African universities**

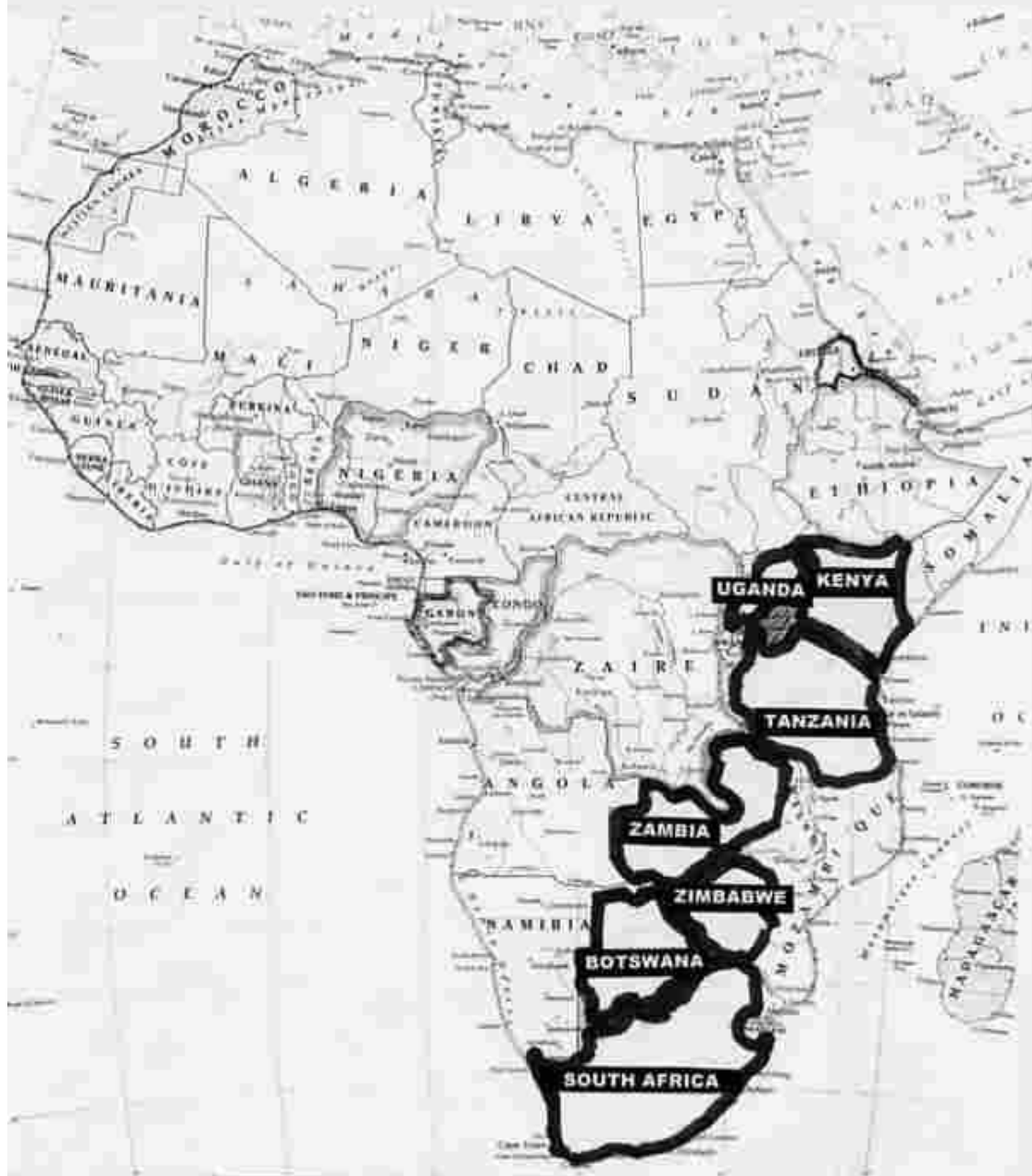
**With the aim of capacity development
within those universities**

**The partner universities comprise the
Universities of Botswana, Cape Town, Dar
es Salaam, Nairobi, Zambia, Zimbabwe,
Makerere University (Uganda) and the
Jomo Kenyatta University of Agriculture
& Technology (Kenya)**

**The Programme has been running since
1996 and it was realized early on that if
the administrative infrastructure was to
work, an administration contact person
would have to be identified at each
partner university**

This was done in June 1998

USHEPiA Programme : Countries



Although communications did improve, unintentional misunderstandings between the USHEPiA Central Office and the administration contacts continue to occur

Administration procedures are often intrinsically complicated. If you are dealing within a culture, shared norms make interaction towards a common goal easier. (I use 'norms' here to mean the taken-for-granted ways of feeling, behaving and thinking). Across cultures, you have to be aware that you need to explain and listen at a deeper level to prevent misunderstandings.

A Workshop for administration contacts of USHEPiA partner universities was held in May 2002 to benchmark Standards & Procedures

Discussions highlighted a variety of unspoken assumptions about :

- ***status associated with university posts***
- ***university administration structures***
 - ***the role of women in society***
 - ***cultural values***
- **and many more**

This presentation will consider some of the lessons learned during the Workshop, and suggest what can be done to improve understanding & communication against this backdrop of culturally diverse assumptions

Culture

The Visible

dress	religion	family
diet	arts	language
social geography	sport	

The Less Visible

education	values	mutual respect
family structure	language	social status
behaviour	politics	gender attitudes
point of view	presentation of self	research & technology
hospitality	taboos	attitudes to death
law	economics	perceptions of others

A person's identity is bound up in their cultural identity. It is very difficult to be comfortable when taken out of your culture. Many people *like* to be defined by their culture – *because* it is comfortable !

General knowledge

Very different in different cultures and sub-cultures

We all have an automatic assumption that people have a similar kind of schooling (formal & informal), learning similar facts

Not so!

In dealing with different cultures, we must learn to be comfortable with our ignorance

We must learn not to be condescending when explaining our cultural norms

We have to create *space* to ask questions, to invite questions, and to listen

Norms

‘A norm is a rather specific rule of the group that the members share and that serves to guide their conduct along grooves deemed desirable by them.

Norms are standards of behaviour, rules for conduct, what the group expects its members to do.’

Norms can be :

- **cultural**
- **institutional**
- **personal**

At all these levels of interaction, people should be sensitive to the high probability of mutual misunderstanding

What we learned from the USHEPiA Workshop

Cultural

- **Respect shown to guests/visitors**
- **Booking the most expensive hotel to honour your guests**
- **Types of food and how it is eaten**
- **Personal etiquette**
- **Male-dominated societies**
- **First and last name use**
- **Eye – to – Eye contact**
- **The concept of working WITH people rather than an emphasis on hierarchy**
- **Entitlement**

- **Different types of country economy**

Institutional

- **A VC automatically travels with an entourage**
- **A VC automatically travels first class**
- **Levels and position of accommodation**
- **Other forms of respect for a position**
- **Loyalty to an institution – what does this mean in different cultures**
- **Feedback : do you give it or keep quiet**
- **Where you are seated at a meeting**

Personal

- **Differences of opinion of what is courteous and what is rude**

- **Different standards of living**

**We did an exercise to identify our shared values.
It was most interesting to discover how much we
have in common, and how easy it was to agree on
these values.**

USHEPiA's Values

1. COMMUNITY

2. TRANSPARENCY

3. EXCELLENCE

4. CLEAR COMMUNICATION

5. ADVANCEMENT

Expectations

It is not possible to pre-empt other people's expectations.

Honesty and communication are the only keys to this problem.

People who have unrealistic expectations of an event, a country, or a person must be dealt with honestly.

Usually they *still* do not believe that they could be wrong, and are often aggressive and disappointed.

Repeated exposure to the same standards ought to educate them.

Consistency is important.

Conclusions

- 1. Be true to yourself**
- 2. Be aware**
- 3. Be respectful**