

Conclusions – ARUA and The Guild’s Academic Leads Meeting – 20 January 2023

Introduction to the ARUA – The Guild Clusters of Excellence Concept

During the introduction to the ARUA – The Guild Clusters of Excellence Ernest Aryeetey presented the vision and the progress made so far throughout the collaboration of the two university networks. His presentation was followed by Jan Palmowski’s introduction to the next steps leading to the implementation of the Clusters of Excellence. Both mentioned the need to ensure that research collaboration also leads to the building of institutional capacity in African universities, including through the creation of new research infrastructure. The African Union and the European Union had committed themselves to these goals, but it was essential now to present a case, through our examples, for funding to support this transformative vision.

Plenary Session

Following the presentation, participants discussed in breakout rooms and reflected on the vision of the ARUA – The Guild Clusters of Excellence. They considered next steps on how to develop academic discussions in the framework of new sustainable and inclusive partnerships. In the plenary that followed, the breakout groups discussed their vision for the thematic and structural establishment of the clusters.

They emphasised the following points:

Communication

- It was acknowledged that some participants felt the communication needed to be improved, for instance some had not had access to the joint dropbox folders containing all the information on Cluster proposals. The Guild and ARUA secretariats suggested to put on their website institutional contact points for colleagues who wished to get involved.
- Some participants raised questions about the composition of the break-out rooms. It was explained that it had been difficult to organise these rooms strictly according to subject interest because many participants had registered to the meeting very late.

Defining the Clusters

- The initiative is distinctive through a coming together of long-term, bottom-up research collaboration and institutional commitment. This was essential to deliver on building up institutional capacity in African universities.

- The clusters of excellence are a valuable opportunity to enhance cooperation and establish an ecosystem build on growing research capacities in African universities, enabled by enhanced research infrastructure, and with the opportunities to create links with the private sector (as appropriate to each thematic area).
- Key to this initiative is the principle of equity, which means the need for new funding approaches from funders as well as universities, as we seek commitments, for instance, from development agencies and R&I funders.
- The academic discussions should be led from a transdisciplinary, challenge-driven perspective to address Africa's current challenges while ensuring that the research is driven by excellence.
- The clusters should be mindful of the needs of young researchers and their needs and ideas.

Size and Shape

- There was a strong notion that, given the current funding horizon, we should aim at not having too many Clusters of Excellence in the first instance; from a funding perspective, for instance, it would not be advisable to have more than three Clusters of Excellence in public health.
- It was considered important for DVCs and Vice-Presidents to frame more strongly how many Clusters there should be and how these should be identified.
- It was noted that every Cluster would require some institutional support, but that the need for such support would likely to be different depending on the subject area, and whether the Cluster was built on existing collaborations or centres, or whether it was a new collaboration.
- The original vision around the ARUA – The Guild Clusters of Excellence envisioned that each cluster would be composed of around four African universities and three to four European ones, but clearly the final number would vary between Clusters.
- In order to avoid overlapping research topics, there should be no more than two or three clusters of excellence in each of the four priority areas of the AU-EU Innovation Agenda (such as Public Health)

Process towards defining Clusters of Excellence

- There was a widespread consensus that an important next step would be for academic leads to articulate their ideas for a Cluster in a concept note. This would make it easier to see how many of the proposals were compatible.
- Subject to the agreement of DVCs and Vice-Presidents, it was suggested that based on the Clusters, interdisciplinary research challenges might be articulated that could bring together a number of the original ideas.
- It was noted that it would not be advisable to bring together too many researchers into one Cluster, to maintain a strong level of ownership with each Cluster.

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- A template for Cluster Proposals will be finalized by DVCs and Vice-Presidents by late March. Key areas for proposals to address are likely to include the headings articulated on Slide 4 of the ‘implementation’ presentation.
- The clusters must be based on a long-term sustainable vision but also be able to identify quick wins in capturing grants early on in the process.
- The academic discussions should go forward through regular meetings and workshops potentially organized with the support of the secretariats of ARUA and The Guild, alongside meetings at the DVC/Vice-Presidents’ level. If possible, some of these meetings might happen in person to build trust.

Wrap-up and Next Steps

At the end of the day, it was agreed amongst participants that:

1. The Academic Leads will prepare a Concept Note on their proposal to explain their vision for the Cluster of Excellence. This would be confirmed early in the coming week in writing by the secretariats of ARUA and The Guild.
2. Academic Leads would receive a conclusion of the key points of the meeting, along with the two presentations.
3. The participants of the meeting will receive all the contact and academic information through a drobox link that will be sent by email (if an academic colleague wishes to participate but does not have access, please contact gaia.grippa@the-guild.eu)
4. Vice-Presidents would reflect on the key outcomes of the meeting, and consider how more guidance could be provided on how the number of Cluster discussions could be reduced.
5. To support better communication over the next few days, the names of all the institutional contact points for the ARUA/Guild collaboration will be made available on our respective websites.

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