

The British Academy's Africa Panel

Professor Robin Law, Chairman of the Africa Panel, describes the establishment and current work of the Panel.

From 2003 the International Policy Committee of the British Academy undertook a review of the Academy's overseas links, which at that time still very much reflected the priorities of the Cold War period, concentrating on links with partner institutions in the former USSR, Eastern Europe and China, while relatively neglecting some other regions of the world, including Africa. It was not the case, it should be stressed, that the BA was not supporting research on and in Africa, since funding was available for Africanist research through the Academy's generic programmes. In addition, the Academy-sponsored institutes and societies programme included some involvement with Africa, notably the British Institute in Eastern Africa. However, there was otherwise a lack of links specifically targeted at Africa. The climate for an attempt to redress this weakness was propitious, with the publication of the report of the Commission for Africa, *Our Common Interest* (March 2005), with its emphasis on the need for renewal of academic institutions in Africa.

The International Policy Committee decided that Area Panels should be established to consider the development of policy towards regions where the Academy had few or no institutional links and, as a first step, Panels were set up for Africa and Latin America in 2005, to operate initially for a period of four years. The Africa Panel consists of eleven academics, selected to be broadly representative of UK Africanists in the humanities and social sciences, having regard both to disciplinary specialisms, regional interest, and institutional affiliation; the Panel includes both Fellows of the British Academy and non-Fellows. It is charged with keeping under review current UK academic (postdoctoral) links with Africa, and advising the International Policy Committee on policy strategy, and is particularly concerned to promote collaboration in research between scholars in the UK and Africa, with a view to capacity building in both areas.

Partly through the initiative of the Africa Panel, and partly independently, the British Academy has already embarked on some important projects relating to Africa. In its new programme of Visiting Fellowships awarded from 2006, around five annually are earmarked for scholars from Africa. Also in 2006, the Africa Panel launched a new funding initiative, the UK-Africa Academic Partnerships, designed to support the development of ongoing links between UK and African research institutions, with normally two such awards made annually. In an independent development, the British Academy's programme of sponsorship of Learned Societies has recently been extended to include the African Studies Association of the UK, which will substantially enhance its ability to support the Africanist academic community. The Africa Panel is also in the process of setting up an Africa Desk, a website to collate information about visiting African academics in the UK; and seeking to organize Africa-related events at the Academy, beginning with a celebration of the work of the recently deceased anthropological film-maker Frank Speed. It is also exploring the possibility of establishing collaborative agreements with national academies and appropriate regional and continental bodies in Africa; it has signed a Memorandum of Understanding with the Ghana Academy of Arts and Sciences; and is currently in conversation with the Academy of Science of South Africa and the Council for the Development of Economic and Social Research in Africa. It has commissioned a report prepared by the Association of Commonwealth Universities to explore the problems faced by African academics in research collaboration; the issues raised by the report, and the frameworks necessary to support research collaboration between the UK and Africa, will be addressed at a conference organised in conjunction with the ASUK and the Royal African Society.

Further information can be found on the international relations section of the Academy's web site at www.britac.ac.uk/funding/guide/intl/
