

**The African Research Institute**

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In November 1985, African Studies in Australia arrived at a new milestone in its development with the official launching of the African Research Institute at La Trobe University. The Hon. Mr Justice McGarvie of the Supreme Court of Victoria and Chancellor of La Trobe University hosted an inaugural luncheon in the City of Melbourne before a group of distinguished guests including Senator Kerry Sibraa, Chairman of the Joint Parliamentary Committee on Foreign Affairs and Defence, H.E., Dr Samir Ahmed, Ambassador of Egypt and official representative of the African Heads of Mission in Australia, leading Australian businessmen and members of the University. After nearly two years of writing submissions and guiding them through various committees, culminating in Academic Board and University Council, it was a little daunting to realize the magnitude of the tasks which lie ahead.

The establishment of the African Research Institute represents a major new initiative for La Trobe University and within Australia. It is unique, being the only multidisciplinary institute in the country focusing specifically on Africa, serving to stimulate and promote research and postgraduate training for Australian and overseas students in African studies. While opening up a broad spectrum of exciting opportunities, its birth in the midst of these troubled times for Australia and for Africa imposes enormous and complex responsibilities. At a time when the Australian government is reducing its already modest aid



commitment to Africa, we are calling for increased awareness and involvement. This necessitates moving beyond that circle of individuals and institutions involved in African concerns; it is sad that despite the government and media calls for greater export initiative, corporate Australia still tends to relegate Africa to the 'too hard' basket. Consequently, in addition to its academic functions, the Institute seeks to provide an advisory service to which government and non-government bodies, such as trade unions, aid agencies, the corporate sector and the media can turn for independent, scholarly information on the complex and ever changing field of African affairs. In order to fulfill its obligations to the community, the Institute hopes to be able to call upon that network of expertise which has grown up through the African Studies Association of Australia and the Pacific (AFSAAP). If it is truly to become the centre of excellence which we all desire, then it will require the support and cooperation of all those in AFSAAP.

Though the Institute has been in operation for less than a year, this seems an excellent opportunity to review what has been achieved to date and to look forward to what we hope to achieve over the next eighteen months. A chance to put to paper ideas and aspirations at the outset of our endeavours and thereby a plan for the future.

During the last six months a vast amount of time has been absorbed in the formulation of policies and procedures, including the drafting of a constitution. Under the constitution, the African Research Institute is governed by an executive committee responsible to the Academic Board, through the Vice Chancellor, for the organization of the Institute's activities and the administration of funds. The executive committee consists of the Director of the Institute as Chairperson, a representative of the Borchardt Library nominated by the Chief Librarian, and four other members at least three of whom shall be permanent full-time members of the academic staff of La Trobe University, elected for a two year term by an



Annual General Meeting. The Director is appointed for five years by the Vice-Chancellor on the recommendation of the Ordinary Members of the Institute. Dr David Dorward was appointed Foundation Director, with an Executive Committee consisting of:

- Dr Robin Burns (Education)
- Dr Martin Chanock (Legal Studies)\*
- Dr Robert Dumsday (Agriculture)
- Dr Godfrey Lubulwa (Economics)
- Mr John Horacek (Library Representative)

In addition, Dr David Goldsworthy, Reader in Politics at Monash University, and Dr James Polhernus, Dean of Social Sciences at Deakin University, have been elected Foundation Associate Members of the Institute in recognition of their close association and support in its formation, while each executive meeting sees new applications for Student Membership.

Under the ARI constitution, individuals in the community or at other tertiary institutions, '... who are engaged in research, teaching or other activities in the areas of interest to the Institute may be elected by the executive committee for a term of three years'. Associate Members have borrowing privileges at the Borchardt Library, the right to list themselves as Members of the Institute and can be elected to the Executive Committee. In addition, office space and other facilities may be made available where possible. In turn, they will be expected to participate in the activities (seminars, conferences, research, etc.) of the Institute. Such Associate Membership may be particularly attractive to those wishing to spend all or part of their study leave consulting research

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\* Ms Penny Andrews, Legal Studies, has subsequently been co-opted onto the committee upon Dr Chanock's departure on overseas leave.



materials at the Borchardt Library or available through the Institute (see discussion of research materials, below). Applications should be addressed to the Director, stating reason(s) for seeking Associate Membership, for what period, and including a curriculum vitae and any other supporting documentation deemed relevant.

Postgraduate students at La Trobe University and other Australian tertiary institutions engaged in African Studies research can apply for Student Membership. Student Members are kept informed of the Institute's activities, apprised of research materials available from the Institute and provided with an opportunity to establish contact with staff and other postgraduates engaged in African research in Australia and overseas. Student Members can also put forward suggestions for the acquisition of specific research materials by the Institute, subject to the availability of funds and the on-going review of the research acquisitions programme. However at this stage the primary service to postgraduates not supervised by members of the Institute will be to provide a centralized network for contact with others in the field.

The Borchardt Library at La Trobe University already possesses a considerable range of monograph and primary research materials, much of the latter on microform. One of the current projects being undertaken by the Institute is a listing of major research holdings relating to Africa in the Borchardt Library, to be published later this year as an ARI Occasional Publication. The Institute would like information on such holdings at other institutions around Australia so that a 'Union List' of African related research materials can be collated and published in subsequent Occasional Papers. At present there is no reliable source of information on microfilm and microfiche holdings, while African material catalogued as, e.g. 'Great Britain, Colonial Office, Colonial Numbered Series, nos 1-352 (1924- )', can easily be overlooked. As the Institute sees as one





of its responsibilities the acquisition of African research materials, it is crucial in these times of stringent funding that we do not unnecessarily duplicate materials available elsewhere. The Institute is also in the process of joining CAMP (the Cooperative African Microfilming Project), a body established by a consortium of American universities for the purchase and production of microform materials on Africa. The CAMP catalogue runs to 642 pages of tightly arranged card catalogue entries, including African newspapers, government publications, scholarly reports, etc. Members of the Institute will have borrowing rights to the CAMP material, thereby greatly increasing the research resources available to scholars in Australia, albeit the Borchardt Library does not have the right under current CAMP regulation to reloan the material to other institutions. At some stage in the future, it is hoped to put cross referenced research listings from throughout Australia on computer so that information on availability is easily accessible and can be periodically up-dated.

Access to information on research resources, as well as potential supervisors, is important if the Institute is to serve as an information centre for potential postgraduate students in African studies. At the moment the information available to Australian students, much less that for the increasing numbers of overseas students, particularly from Africa, is haphazard. There are various Commonwealth schemes to assist students from Africa, but these are not well known even amongst Africanist academics, and the choice of the institution to which the overseas student goes is often based on rather tenuous criteria. It is a matter which needs to be examined very carefully, possibly under the auspices of AFSAAP.

Similarly, Africanists in Australia need readier access to information on the research and development programmes of institutions and academic departments in Africa. After all, the comparabilities between Africa and



Australia which are so frequently mentioned means that we in Australia can learn from the research being undertaken in Africa, and in fields that transcend the African context. One merely needs to think in terms of agricultural and veterinary research in Africa. To this end, the Institute has been forging contacts with such bodies in Africa\* and has begun to collect research plans and reports. In due course these will be deposited at the Borchardt Library where scholars can have access to them through inter-library loans, with lists of reports received published in the AFSAAP Newsletter and/or through a separate ARI newsletter.

With the current demands on staff and resources, the Institute has momentarily set aside consideration of an ARI Network Newsletter. It is debatable if yet another publication is necessary or desirable. For the immediate future, I hope to make much greater use of the AFSAAP Newsletter than to date. I must confess a profound sense of indebtedness to Jim Polhemus for soldiering on with the Newsletter and guilt for not supplying him with more material for publication. Nevertheless the Institute does need to circulate information more frequently than the thrice yearly AFSAAP Newsletter, information on seminars and other activities, as well as maintaining an autonomous identity through the production of Occasional Papers. It is a matter which is still in the formative stage, however I would not wish to do anything that would be prejudicial to the AFSAAP Newsletter, which is now so widely circulated and well regarded.

As part of its 'informative' role, the Institute has hosted a series of monthly African Studies public seminars during 1986 and is in the process of preparing its

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\* In accord with the resolutions passed by AFSAAP and the La Trobe University Staff Association, the African Research Institute has a policy of refraining from affiliation and cooperation in research and teaching with any organization or institute in South Africa that may be seen to be promoting the causes of Apartheid, which is taken to include South African educational, research and business institutions.



1987 programme. Topics have ranged from a discussion of French, Lybian and American intervention in the politics of Tchad, various aspects of the South African situation, the international news media and the African food crisis, and the problems of political lobbying for Africa in America. Forthcoming seminars include Professor Michael Crowder's presentation of part of his research on Tshekedi Khama, 'The flogging of Phmehas McIntosh; a crisis in Anglo-African Relations, Bechuanaland, 1933', and Ms Bemma Donkoh of the United Nations High Commission for Refugees on the situation in the Horn of Africa. The public seminars have been very well attended by individuals from around Melbourne, as well as the La Trobe University academic community. It is proposed that from time to time, seminar papers which are of particular relevance to Australia or which would be of interest to a more general audience will be published as Occasional Papers.

Finally, the Institute had continued to explore sources of funding and support for African research from outside La Trobe University. While the various Schools have been quite generous, additional funds are needed if an effective on-going research and postgraduate training programme is to be successful. At the moment, interesting and important postgraduate research projects are being hindered by the lack of funds available for aspects such as field research. Moreover one would like to have the resources to assist promising, as well as established, scholars from Africa who would like to take all or part of their study leave in Australia but for whom the costs are an impediment, despite the decline in the value of the Australian dollar. A great deal more basic research needs to be undertaken if Africa is to come out of the shadows of Australian commercial and political consciousness. I believe there is a potential for the further development of Australian-African relations to the mutual benefit of both, but we still have a long way to go.

