

OPALS Position Statement on Scholar Destinations

20th December 2022

This document considers the destination of scholars participating in the Oppenheimer Programme in African Landscape Systems (OPALS) and summarises the consensus within the OPALS community.

We have been considering the destination of African scholars supported by OPALS to undertake programmes of advanced postgraduate and postdoctoral study. In some areas, there is a general concern about the potentially emigration of bright talented individuals resulting in a loss of intellectual capital, which encompasses the emigration of young academics awarded with scholarships to pursue higher education elsewhere in the world. This is sometimes referred to as a 'brain drain', defined by the Oxford dictionary as "the emigration of highly trained or qualified people from a particular country", leading to a net loss in the services such persons would contribute if they stayed in their home countries.

We considered whether it is appropriate for OPALS scholars to be asked to express (non-binding) intent to return to their country or continent of origin for a minimum period to mitigate this perceived risk. Such practice is widespread, for example, the United Kingdom (UK) funded Chevening scheme requires studentship recipients commit to returning to their countries of origin for a minimum of two years following the completion of their MSc programmes, or the Dutch Orange Knowledge Programme with similar requirements to return to the country and employer of origin following completion of the studentship. Here, we unpack a broader perspective and explain why we object to such simplistic restrictions based on geography alone.

Firstly, we believe that the most important aspect is to ensure that all privileged scholars selected for support through this training programme understand their obligations to continue to focus their research on supporting the sustainability of human-environment interactions in the continent of Africa. This is a commitment that outlasts the finite duration of the studentships themselves, and which should continue for entire careers. A key focus is for African scholarship to be led by African scholars with intimate connections to, and understanding of, the social-ecological environments they have experienced.

Secondly, we consider the dependency of being a productive researcher and an agent for positive change upon having access to suitable resources, stimulating research environment and supportive systems. These parameters are often linked with availability of funding but also intersect with intellectual and institutional cultures and personal security. Not all environments currently are conducive to nurturing the skills and passion to enable individuals to make effective long-term contributions to helping African societies. While this situation is evolving as research-intensive African institutions continue to develop and strengthen, there remains for example a well-documented and widespread paucity of research-focused postdoctoral positions across the Continent, which presents a particular challenge for early career researchers looking for opportunities to develop applied research careers following the completion of doctoral programmes, for example. This should be balanced by efforts to promote investment into research capabilities across the Continent but accepting that achieving cultural shifts within institutions can take a long time and significant and sustained incentives and leadership.

Thirdly, we believe that the approaches to how we undertake our scientific practice is more important than institutional locations alone, particularly given the availability of tools and networks that enable both virtual and physical communication with partners, stakeholders, and collaborators around the

world. This includes taking meaningful steps towards de-colonialising our work, our institutions, and the formal knowledge structures that we engage with. We believe that there is a risk that focusing on institutional geographies alone may be overly reductionist in our interconnected world. We want to support more effective linkages between research institutions and networks to help optimise the use of limited resources to address strategic challenges. This might be thought of as a question of reconfiguring and reimagining functional spaces to enable contributions.

Finally, a core aim of OPALS is to “Support a strong, credible, and connected voice for African communities, land managers and researchers in the global climate and ecological crisis”. We believe strongly in the need for this global African voice to help correct imbalances in power relations that continue to perpetuate social and ecological inequalities across many dimensions. We believe that it is possible for African scholars working in institutions worldwide to undertake work that brings benefits to those living in Africa, and that in some instances these individuals might be better empowered to develop and advocate for more effective and inclusive solutions to global challenges. Not least this could include engaging directly with supranational organizations to help improve their decision-making processes. Fundamentally, this might be considered as a question of the spatial and temporal scale over which benefits to Africans are sought.

In advocating this position, we in no way seek to discourage those who benefit from such opportunities from returning to their countries of origin. But given the above points, we believe that it would be counter to the overall aims of OPALS to *restrict* the geographic movement of supported scholars after their programmes of study, as such restrictions potentially undermine our larger ambitions to empower change agents that benefit the sustainability of social-ecological systems in Africa.

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