

**Reflections on International Travel - Specially (Africa, 2023)
and Generally (two AVPI terms)**

[LinkedIn post](#) by Ian Rowlands, December 2023



The University of Waterloo delegation visits Future Africa (University of Pretoria) on 6 December 2023.

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December 14, 2023

I have just completed an enlightening, inspiring, and energizing trip to Africa on behalf of the [University of Waterloo](#). Across three countries, I had – alongside Waterloo colleagues – meetings with representatives from a number of higher education and government organizations. I wish to thank them all for their willingness to welcome us into their workplaces, to tell us about their work, to be interested in our activities, and to co-create paths for action going forward:

- In Ghana: [African Institute for Mathematical Sciences, Ghana](#); [Ashesi University](#); [Kwame Nkrumah University of Science and Technology, Kumasi](#) (KNUST); Ministry of Environment, Science, Technology and Innovation; and [University of Ghana](#)
- In Kenya: [Aga Khan University](#); [International Development Research Centre \(IDRC\)](#); [Kenyatta University](#); [Strathmore University](#); and [University of Nairobi](#)
- In South Africa: [The National Research Foundation of South Africa \(NRF\)](#); Science Forum South Africa; [Stellenbosch University](#); [University of Cape Town](#); [University of Pretoria](#); and [University of the Western Cape](#)

I will continue to reflect upon this trip – and the follow-up work will no doubt serve to prioritize particular pathways and potentially reveal additional opportunities as well. Nevertheless, at this time, I offer three reflections.

1) The time is ripe for deeper University of Waterloo engagement with Africa

In Waterloo International, as we prepared for our trip to Africa, we did bibliometric, web, and other searches in order to understand better the ways in which Waterloo engages with African institutions. We found a rich web of connections at multiple levels:

- *individually*, a number of Waterloo faculty members are from Africa and/or have bilateral connections (many of which are long-standing) with colleagues on the Continent.
- *collectively*, a few Waterloo faculty members lead large international projects with active African institutional participation (e.g., International Tobacco Control Policy Evaluation project, Vulnerability to Viability Global Partnership, etc.) or are active as participants in other projects and networks involving Africa.

Recent initiatives by the University of Waterloo are serving to grow these connections both in strength and in number: Waterloo's Black Faculty Cluster Hire and the Provost's Program for Black and Indigenous Postdoctoral Scholars, for instance, have brought, to our campus, outstanding talent with multiple connections to, and interests in, the Continent. The appointment of Prof. Denis Aheto ([University of Cape Coast](#), Ghana) as the 2024 TD Walter Bean Visiting Professorship serves to grow further the links.

In Waterloo International, we complemented our research with reach-outs to Waterloo's constituencies, in order to further understand members' activities, connections, and priorities for future engagement. This work uncovered additional people-to-people linkages (including many valued personal relationships, which provide such a critical foundation in international higher educational work) as well as a number of requests from Waterloo colleagues for our representation of their activities and interests to African partners during our forthcoming trip.

That latter point was most welcomed by us, and somewhat unusual for us to hear. In Waterloo International, while we always give our local stakeholders advance notice of our travels, we do not always get the level of interest that we saw in our preparations for this trip. It was empowering – and satisfying – to travel internationally this time knowing that colleagues were keen to have us report back with what we have learned! We are now following up with them!

The above is all about our preparation – necessary, but not sufficient, for international impact. What is also needed is a corresponding interest on the part of the international partner. ... I am delighted to report that, in Africa during the past two weeks, we found that!

On every one of the visits I note above, we found at least one point of connection – and usually more:

- A high priority upon research was evident virtually everywhere we went – be that visits to long-established universities or to recently-formed higher educational institutions. Indeed, some of these organizations have highlighted particular subject-areas in their own strategic plans, and many of those overlap with Waterloo's own priorities (e.g., climate change, data science, public health, and the SDGs more broadly).
- Conversations about research often turned quickly to discussions about how graduate students can be effective agents of international collaboration in higher education. Whenever we mentioned our innovative student mobility programme with [Indian Institute of Technology, Madras](#), it sparked interest and energized conversations about the multiple benefits of two-way student mobility. Such programmes – be they in-person or virtual – not only allow individual graduate students to (i) tap into another institution's knowledge and expertise and (ii) experience another academic culture and society, but they also grow students' international professional networks and strengthen international, inter-institutional links. Other means of mobility – including

undergraduate academic exchanges and study abroad, work-integrated learning opportunities, and short-term course-based and/or immersive experiences – were also often discussed.

- Underpinning all of these discussions was the response to the ‘why?’ question regarding prospective international higher education cooperation. And that response was about impact – at Waterloo, we take action with international university partners in order to have impact at the local, national, and/or global levels. When references were made to – and explanations offered regarding – Waterloo’s Global Futures framework, they were very well-received. And whenever our partners offered their own frameworks and themes around purpose – for instance, [Future Africa UP \(University of Pretoria \)](#), and ‘Service to Society’ ([Strathmore University](#)) – we found many connections with what we do at Waterloo.
- Indeed, building upon that last point, scenarios, projections, and possibilities about the future role of higher education in society more broadly were always received with interest and sometimes with reciprocity during our time in Africa. [Ashesi University](#), for instance, introduced its third-decade plan to us - its own response to thinking beyond a conventional ‘five-year plan’. Our own approach - namely, Waterloo at 100 (in 2057) - was received with much interest. More broadly, there was desire to discuss further the ‘best’ roles for universities in society going forward.

We, at Waterloo International, do our best to prepare for a major international trip, but we do not know ‘how it will go’ until we, of course, ‘get there, on the ground’. In this case, we were convinced from our desk-based research, from our conversations with many Waterloo stakeholders, and from our own work on the Continent to that point that the decision to execute an exploratory, institutional-level trip in Africa was a good one. And with the outstanding reception we received in Africa during the past two weeks now in hand, I will say that that decision was in fact an ‘excellent’ one. It now, of course, behooves us to follow up effectively – to leverage the introductions, the conversations, the connections, the heightened profile, and the good will. That work on building equitable international partnerships is already underway!

2) I felt a close connection with the international offices we visited

When we conduct visits to outstanding universities on such international trips, we often work with our peer international office to co-create the agenda for mutual benefit and impact. When the visit is led by the President and Vice-Chancellor (as was the case with Dr. [Vivek Goel](#) leading the delegation in South Africa and Ghana between 3 and 9 December), our partner’s President and Vice-Chancellor usually leads in the welcoming of our members. Alternatively, when the visit is led by me (as was the case in Kenya, between 29 November and 1 December, and in Ghana on 11 and 12 December), we are usually received by

my peer (who often held the office of the Dean of International Programmes at the universities we visited).

No matter the 'level' of the delegation, there were inevitably opportunities to 'compare notes' with peer professionals from our host universities about internationalization in higher education. When it was a Presidential-led delegation, those discussions might arise during the leadership conversation, but they would certainly come up during the sidebar conversations I would have with the Dean or equivalent (during the photographs, during the tour, etc.). And when I led the delegation, the two of us (me and my peer) – along with staff colleagues from our respective 'international offices' – would soon 'talk shop', noticing the commonalities in each other's presentations, perspectives, and priorities. Consider the following in this regard:

- *Moving from outputs to outcomes:* Earlier phases of internationalization in higher education, which celebrated MoU signings as 'end points', appear to now be well behind us. At every visit, discussions were focused upon how internationalization could serve to improve lives and livelihoods through better learning, research, community engagement, and institutional operations in higher education.
- *Thinking carefully about candidates for engagement:* At Waterloo International, we aim to initiate partnerships in areas where evidence suggests that 'traction' could be secured. We look for activity already underway, for shared values, common strengths, and potential synergies. I was struck by the extent to which peers were keen to use similar pointers in order to find overlapping 'sweet spots' – areas where both universities sensed such traction could be secured.
- *Funnels, areas, and means:* These visits suggested to me that the perspective that impactful international partnerships in higher education are 'long games' is widely-held. Moreover, when those partnerships are new or are wanting to be deepened/widened, members at both universities must be presented with actionable opportunities to build shared understanding and shared trust (e.g., through virtual introductory meetings). And not all 'first dates' will necessarily lead to 'second dates', which is just fine. Moreover, while we continue to bring together prospective partners on the basis of a shared 'interest area', we have learned that it is important to keep the possible means of their engagement – themes for that 'second date', if you will – numerous and varied. To explore compatibility, the colleagues from the two universities could decide to bring some of their graduate students together in a virtual colloquium, they may decide to do guest virtual lectures in each other's undergraduate courses, or they might decide to co-author a 750-word blog entry on some issue of common interest. Options open, goals modest, and wins early are mantra that, from the evidence of this trip, seem to be shared widely as we build meaningful connections.
- *'Partners of partners':* As we all recognize the importance of partnerships (e.g., SDG 17), universities are acknowledging the value of multi-university associations. Numerous

times during our visits, we learned of our host's impactful engagements with priority partners (e.g., @[Kwame Nkrumah University of Science and Technology, Kumasi](#)'s work with the [Technical University of Munich](#)), with inter-continental network associations (e.g., [The Guild of European Research-Intensive Universities](#)'s work with the [African Research Universities Alliance \(ARUA\)](#)). For our part, we responded with reference to our valued partners (e.g., [University of Twente](#), which is also a partner with [Kenyatta University](#)), and mention of our own national associations (e.g., [U15 Canada](#)) and their international connections. Understanding 'partners of partners' not only allows additional resources to be considered, but also allows, potentially, for a richer understanding of a university's international priorities.

3) I 'doubly-soaked it in', given that it was my last trip as Waterloo's AVPI

This was my last trip as the University of Waterloo's Associate Vice-President, International. My second term in the office concludes at the end of this month. As such, I ensured that I savoured every moment as much as I could.

Any international travel is, of course, a privilege. Add to that the fact that I have had the honour and the benefit of leveraging the University of Waterloo's outstanding reputation (and often got to travel – as I did in this trip – alongside some of Waterloo's leaders, faculty members, and staff members), and my trips become even more special. More specifically, the draw of Waterloo's name and people opens the door to meetings with interesting, insightful and/or important individuals in fascinating and fantastic locations. This trip was no exception. The people met and the places visited were wonderful.

And the various idiosyncrasies of travel were welcomed by me on this trip – for I knew that while they were sometimes perplexing, challenging, and/or frustrating at the time, they will soon, in my memories, be viewed as quaint, charming, and/or wonderful fodder for stories! Here I am thinking of (a representative rather than exhaustive list follows): packing for multiple climates; anticipating (and choreographing) gift exchanges; reviewing airlines' luggage policies; maintaining healthy food and drink consumption patterns; tracking drivers' WhatsApp numbers; managing irregular sleeping patterns; and more!

Finally, I will especially miss the camaraderie of travelling with my Waterloo colleagues: (i) co-creating and executing itineraries; (ii) developing 'rhythms' – unplanned but emergent synergies and complementarities – in group discussions with international partners; (iii) gleaning insights from debriefings and discussions; and (iv) sharing laughs and stories during long working days. This trip also had weekend activities to learn about the countries' histories (i.e., Robben Island in South Africa and Cape Coast Castle in Ghana) in order to complement the weekday partnership discussions. All of those experiences are wonderful memories that I

will take forward with me, and those friendships made across all the Waterloo trips I have taken will continue to be 'real' for me in 2024 and beyond!

In conclusion, this was a wonderful trip – one that has the possibility of catalyzing meaningful activities and impacts for Waterloo and African partners in the months to come. I am extremely grateful for the opportunity to have been involved in it!



Montreal, QC, 13 December 2023