

At the University of Bristol

FREQUENTLY ASKED QUESTIONS

What is the problem?

Africa's position in the global science system is deeply unfavourable. The continent contributes a tiny fraction of scientific publications (1.6% in 2018) and researchers (0.7% in 2018) globally. African knowledge systems, scholars and institutions are, with a handful of exceptions, poorly positioned in worldwide rankings. This situation is due to power imbalances in the production of scientific knowledge that have arisen from colonial histories. International collaborations with the global North dominate Africa's scientific effort and, more often than not, reproduce the imbalances.

Why is the Charter necessary?

Because collaborations with the global North dominate Africa's research effort, changing the way such collaborations are configured has the potential to effect a rebalancing of the system overall – to ensure that African scholars, institutions and knowledges from the continent take their rightful place in the global scientific effort. In other words, these collaborations have the potential to be transformative. The Charter provides a framework for advancing such transformative research collaborations.

Why was it necessary to come up with the Charter at this point in time?

The Africa Charter builds on a long history of African intellectual thought on how to foster more equitable global South-North research partnerships. However, the present moment – with a more acute awareness of the need to undo unjust legacies of colonialism and the urgency of finding better, radically different, solutions to our collective global crises – is the right time for a much more fundamental and systemic change in research relations.

How would the Charter transform the research landscape on the continent?

With good uptake of the Charter's principles among global North and South universities, research funders, publishers and scholars, we would see African researchers, institutions and their communities following their own lines of inquiry, creating new and innovative research projects, and new knowledges - including how the world works and ought to work at local, national and global levels - and asserting these knowledges to serve the continent and the world.

Such work would underpin a flourishing research ecosystem and the building of renown, globally valued scholarship and expertise in the continent. This would be supported by greater investment from within Africa as well as adjusted policies of global funders.

What are the benefits to institutions of signing up to the Charter?

All institutions, whether in Africa, global North or beyond, will gain an opportunity to join forces to shape a future scientific effort that is more just and urgently needed to address the multiple crises humanity and the planet face.

What should institutions do to get involved?

Please [read the Charter on our website](#) and register your interest, we will then send you a formal declaration of endorsement to sign.

When will the wording of the Charter be finalised?

The wording of the Charter is final, but the framework itself must be understood as a work in progress: as critical reflection on its concerns, principles and aspirations and, crucially, attempts to put them into practice unfold, refined thinking and articulations will emerge and will be captured in a body of writing and further agendas inspired by the Charter.

What exactly will universities have to do to comply with the Charter, and over what timeframe? How will this differ for global North and African universities?

The task we all need to embrace collectively and in the shorter term is to establish foundations for - and set in motion - longer-term processes of structural change. This means developing understandings, across geographies and HE and science sector spaces, of

- i. Where and how present mindsets and capabilities, practices, and policy frames either sustain or help redress the multi-layered power imbalances in scientific knowledge production
- ii. Feasible approaches and intervention points for adjusting collaborative practice so as to better enable and incentivise a transformative mode

of collaborating (i.e. that redresses all layers of power imbalances)

As signatories to the Charter, universities ought now to

- i. Commit to seeking and generating such understandings and to championing the Charter within their spheres of engagement
- ii. Engage in exchange and joint learning on the status quo, and on identified approaches and intervention points for Charter-aligned policy and practice adjustments, liaising with other signatories to help consolidate the 'Community of Interest' around the Charter (and help nurture, in time, an emerging 'Community of Practice')
- iii. In time, commit formally to pursuing the identified necessary adjustments to practice, and policy and regulatory frameworks

How will this be assessed?

No formal assessment mechanisms will be imposed. Indeed it would not be appropriate to do so. We all, as signatories to the Charter need to understand ourselves as part of a Community of Interest, of joint learning – and of shared practice. So each signatory institution is encouraged to share (using the platforms and forums that will be provided) the actions it is considering or has taken, and the insights and learnings generated.

When will case studies be available to show the benefits of working to Africa Charter principles?

The Charter steering group are working to develop a series of 'pathfinder' or demonstration projects designed to put a transformative mode of research collaborations into practice across the sciences and disciplinary fields. These projects will yield learning not only on useful approaches, including methodologies, for partnership working, but also, importantly, on the desirable outcomes and impacts (as well as unintended consequences) it engenders.

What should a signatory do once they have signed up? What are their next steps?

- i. Publicise your endorsement of the Charter, for example by stating it explicitly on your organisation's website and in other relevant communications (a logo for the Charter is being developed to support such statements)
- ii. Engage with the platforms and forums for exchange that will be set up for the community of interest of Charter signatories
- iii. Plan to review collaboration policies and practice in your institution against the Charter to better understand how they sustain or help redress the multilayered power imbalances, and what adjustments could incentivise a transformative mode of collaborating

Why Bristol? What's distinctive – why are we leading?

Bristol's key role as a facilitating institution for the Charter initiative is underpinned by the confluence of three factors:

- i. PARC's explicit mission – inspired by an embrace of pan African concerns – to champion change in the global science and research ecosystem, enabling the continent to take its rightful place
- ii. An institutional value orientation towards the redress of 'social injustice' broadly, but with the need to disrupt unjust legacies of colonialism in higher education and scientific knowledge production.
- iii. The University's explicit acknowledgement of its links to transatlantic enslavement, and of the need to pursue and invest in restorative futures.

Why (only) Africa? Are there other inequitable partnerships with other bits of the world?

The development of the Charter has been a deliberately Africa-centred initiative – driven from and reflecting urgent concerns in the continent. Similar concerns and

needs for transformation clearly apply to other formerly colonised parts of the world. As such there is much potential for cross-fertilisation in efforts around the Charter connecting to relevant initiatives elsewhere

My research is non-compliant and I'm not minded to change... will I be penalised?

We should not think about the Charter in terms of compliance or non-compliance. All those who wish to support the initiative are invited to embark on a journey of reflecting on our past or current work in light of the Charter, and of considering where and how we could shape our future research (or, indeed, our teaching) to better reflect Charter principles. Exchange and joint learning on this with others (within or beyond our institution) as part of a Community of Interest (and, progressively, of Practice) will be an important part of this journey.

I am not a researcher but directly work with researchers in my role in the administration, finance and management segments of the University. How can I contribute to the objectives of the Charter?

The transformation we want to pursue is all-encompassing and requires changes in consciousness, norms, practices, and policies across the board. Hence, it is important that we all become aware of the direct and indirect role that dominant perceptions and practices in our respective area of work have in sustaining power inequities and injustices. The university as a complex organisation has multiple actors and we believe that every actor has a role to play in redressing unjust relations derived from the colonial legacy.

Does the Charter also apply to northern African countries?

Yes – it does not make a distinction between universities in Northern and Southern parts of the continent. North African institutions have signed the Charter and were present at its launch.