

GLOBAL

New Higher Education Solutions Network to support development

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Makerere University in Uganda and six American universities have been selected by the US Agency for International Development to join a US\$130 million five-year project called the Higher Education Solutions Network, which will use research to support development. Makerere University in Uganda and six American universities have been selected by the US Agency for International Development, USAID, to join a US\$130 million five-year project called the Higher Education Solutions Network, or HESN, which will use research to support development.

HESN was launched on 9 November, according to a USAID [press statement](#).

Speaking to *University World News* John Daly, a science and technology consultant and former director of research at USAID, said: "The project represents an important initiative for USAID. Announced right after the US presidential election, by Secretary of State Hillary Clinton, it has considerable symbolic value.

While USAID has a long history of collaboration with universities, this initiative was a "renovation and extension of that cooperation", Daly added.

HESN represents a new era of development by tapping universities, research and students to catalyse global action by supporting a culture of entrepreneurship, and fostering multifaceted approaches to development by creating more results-driven, effective, efficient, cost-effective and accessible development solutions.

It is intended to solve problems such as global health and food insecurity by tapping into various academic disciplines, from architecture and urban planning to engineering and business.

HESN is being awarded up to US\$130 million over five years – subject to the availability of federal funds – as part of USAID's new partnership with academia. Researchers will collaborate to channel innovative solutions into international development programmes.

The seven partner institutions were selected from about 500 universities that applied.

They include the Massachusetts Institute of Technology (MIT), University of California – Berkeley, Michigan State University, Duke University, Texas A&M University, William and Mary College and Makerere University.

Each university will establish development labs that will initiate a global network to engage academics, students and the broader community worldwide.

"Makerere University is unusual in Africa in that it has led a consortium of Ugandan universities to work on development issues, and has years of experience in support of the government's decentralisation programme," said Daly.

"It is important that USAID has chosen an African university as a key player in this initiative, but especially important that it has chosen Makerere."

As part of the HESN initiative, MIT will receive US\$25 million to work on two aspects of the project.

One programme will focus on creating an International Development Innovation Network, which will rope in universities to create and disseminate technologies in developing countries. “The idea of a global network of universities dealing with scientific and technological aspects of development is exciting,” commented Daly.

Another programme, the comprehensive initiative on technology evaluation, will study technologies intended to alleviate poverty to determine which ones work best, fit into a particular culture and can be easily replicated.

Berkeley’s leadership in developing innovative and practical solutions for global problems is being recognised in a US\$20 million cooperative agreement with USAID.

The award will fund a new multidisciplinary lab to prepare inventions for the developing world, train a new generation of development practitioners and innovators, and launch a brand new field of research – development engineering.

“USAID has enlisted some of America's greatest universities to lead the effort, and they have agreed to provide 60% matching funds – a real indication of their commitment,” said Daly.

“The idea is that while each university will lead in a specific field, there will be collaboration among those fields. Thus MIT and Berkeley will be collaborating on a new approach to engineering in development.”

There was great potential for the programme to be extended in new directions, Daly added. “The most obvious ones are improving food crop production and technologies for small enterprises that create employment while satisfying local needs.”

As the United States congress tackles a ‘fiscal cliff’ that will demand major budget reductions, Daly said, it was important that this initiative be protected. “It will take some time to prove its merits, and must be funded until that proof can be provided.”

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