

Comment on “Present and Future of the British Schools, Institutes and Societies Abroad”

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Dr Finlayson has provided a valuable and timely review of the work of the various British Academy-supported Schools, Institutes and Societies abroad, and of the main challenges they face. It is interesting to find that many of the same issues with which the BIEA has to deal are common to the other institutions, especially those with overseas bases. Thus, there is very little to add in terms of generalities to Dr Finlayson's summary except to note that, despite being 'research positions', all of the senior appointments at these institutions come with a range of administrative duties that typically include handling local staff recruitment and management, day-to-day overview of operations and budgets, liaison with local research institutions and similar bodies, fundraising and various editorial responsibilities, among others. This is not to bemoan the fact; rather, it is to make the point that while the administrative load may be different from that faced by colleagues in British universities, these appointments can in no way be regarded as extended sabbaticals. Finding the right balance between, on the one hand, administrative and editorial responsibilities, and on the other, individual research and publication output is one of the biggest challenges, and at times the former have to be given precedent over the latter. This is particularly the case for an institution such as the BIEA, which has to respond to the demands of several different constituencies, comprising British-based researchers and the UK research community, researchers and students based in the region, local and overseas members and the broader research community with an interest or specialisation in the subject areas the Institute supports. Satisfying the expectations of these different constituencies often requires quite different strategies.

As Finlayson notes, those institutions with overseas bases, and especially those located outside the European Community, constantly have to demonstrate their value to the local research community and their host nation. At a practical level, this is essential so as to ensure the renewal of work and residence permits, and to obtain research clearance for different projects. For a body such as the BIEA, which operates in a region where the levels of funding and opportunities for research are severely restricted, there are also good ethical reasons why such relations should be more proactive. In the BIEA's case, this is achieved partly by actively involving local academics on BIEA projects as specialist contributors or principal investigators; partly by providing placements on these for local students and recent university graduates so as to provide practical training in field research; and partly through supporting occasional seminars, conferences and workshops in the region, as well as maintaining a specialist library that local researchers and students can access readily. Such investments of time, energy and resources also pay dividends for UK-based researchers wishing to work in the region, not least because the contacts and goodwill that the BIEA has built up over the years often help facilitate the processes of obtaining research clearance, identifying local col-

laborators or referees, and understanding local research traditions and sensitivities, that might seem rather daunting and uncertain from a distance.

Turning to more specific issues touched on by Finlayson, it is important to stress that from its inception the BIEA has always had a multi-disciplinary focus. After all, when established in 1959 it was called the British Institute for History and Archaeology in East Africa, and the contraction of its name in 1970 to the current form did nothing to change this. If anything, it broadened the Institute's remit, both geographically and in terms of its disciplinary scope. Consequently, it now supports and aims to facilitate research in 16 different countries stretching from the Horn of Africa and the Sudan south as far as Zambia, Zimbabwe, Mozambique and Madagascar. The last three Assistant Directors have been historians, and over the last 15 years the Institute has supported several major historical studies spanning both the late pre-colonial and colonial eras. In its collaborative work with the Institut Français de Recherche en Afrique (IFRA), Nairobi, the Institute has also become engaged in research on the early postcolonial period under broad headings such as "Crime and Criminality" and "Youth and Society".

While archaeology remains a central element of the Institute's work and research strategy, few of its projects in recent years have been exclusively archaeological. Instead, emphasis has been placed on developing multi-disciplinary, and increasingly interdisciplinary, projects that bring together groups of researchers and students from the social and environmental sciences, the arts and the humanities. A good example of what is typically entailed is the Institute's three-year project on "Landscape and Environmental Change in Eastern and Southern Africa", which ended recently. Core funding was provided by a supplementary grant from the British Academy Board for Academy-Sponsored Institutes and Societies (BASIS) as part of its New Initiatives scheme, with additional resources provided by several of the participating research institutions. As well as archaeology, other disciplines represented included geography, soil science, agriculture, history, palynology and anthropology, involving a mix of senior and junior scholars from 13 different research organisations – of which over half are in Africa. The various field elements of the project, which were conducted in Kenya, Zambia and Zimbabwe, also provided the basis for five undergraduate, two MPhil and five doctoral dissertations. The emphasis given in this project to assisting students is also reflected in the BIEA's Graduate Attachment scheme, which is unique among the Schools and Institutes. The scheme aims to provide recent graduates with four to six months of practical research experience in eastern Africa while also enhancing their knowledge of the archaeology and history of the region. The majority find the experience very beneficial, and over the last decade around 70% have gone on to do a further degree.

Another aspect of the BIEA's operations is its ability to respond quickly to changing circumstances and research opportunities across the region. By virtue of its overseas base, it has been able on many occasions in the past to launch exploratory research expeditions in areas that had previously been closed to scholars, as they open up. The Institute is also often able to respond to urgent requests for support, as has been the case recently, when news emerged of work on a major dam above the 4th Nile Cataract in the Sudan, and the Institute was asked to fund rescue archaeology campaigns there.

Similarly, when it became clear in early 2004 that a lasting peace agreement between the government of Sudan in Khartoum and the Sudan People's Liberation Movement (SPLM) based in South Sudan might be agreed, the Institute approached the SPLM for a meeting to discuss the possibility of future BIEA research activity and the training needs of South Sudan in the fields of museology, archive management and cultural resource management. The meeting led to a two-day workshop on these topics in April 2005, at which priorities for training and research were agreed. As importantly, it helped establish a network of individuals and organisations with shared concerns regarding South Sudan's cultural heritage, resulting in a number of initiatives including a new programme of research by the BIEA.

As for the future, the BIEA would like to facilitate greater involvement of local scholars and students in its projects, without undermining or diminishing the level of support it offers to UK-based researchers. In this regard, it could become a local base from which collaborative field courses for UK and East African students might be run. In the longer term, I would like to see the BIEA offer six- to nine-month post-doctoral junior research fellowships, especially but not exclusively to East African scholars. No such fellowships exist at any university in the region, and many of those who have recently completed their doctorate find themselves quickly burdened with a heavy teaching and administrative load (assuming they have a job to return to, which is often not the case). As a result, they rarely have an opportunity to publish their research fully. This is a situation that is clearly not beneficial to either individual career development or the fostering of a research culture in local universities and museums. Under present structures of funding, it is highly unlikely that funds for such a scheme would be forthcoming from the British Academy. The recent emphasis given to enhancing opportunities for Africans from all walks of life by the British government, the G8 nations and the EU might provide ways of securing funds, however. In this regard, it is encouraging to note that the Blair Commission on Africa (Commission for Africa 2005) placed particular emphasis on the need for broader understanding of African culture and heritage so as to place current issues and problems in longer-term, historical perspective. Bill Rammell, the current UK Minister of State for Higher Education and Lifelong Learning, has also written recently about the need for richer nations, Britain included, to take more positive action to halt, and if possible reverse, the 'brain drain' from the African continent (Rammell 2005; see also Baty 2005; Times Higher Editorial 2005). Establishing opportunities for scholars to continue research and publication without the need to leave Africa would seem to be a crucial component of any such initiative. It remains to be seen, however, whether the noble words and numerous position papers on the West's relations with Africa that have been given such prominence over the last 18 months will actually be transformed into constructive action. From where I sit in Nairobi, I remain deeply sceptical that the rhetoric will result in significant changes to the way in which higher education and research are regarded by the donor community (the Scandinavians excepted), but I would be delighted to be proved wrong.

Finally, and looking beyond the specific interests of the BIEA, there is perhaps a need for all the Schools, Institutes and Societies to develop closer links with one another in order to foster collaborative research projects. To some extent the institutions around

the Mediterranean have already begun this, and are probably best placed to develop even more inclusive research projects and agendas. However, other geographical areas spring to mind that would link a number of institutions – such as the Indian Ocean region, and what one might term the ‘Arab world’, from North Africa through the Horn to Arabia and the Middle East. In this way, other areas that are not yet included within the remit of any of the existing Schools, Institutes and Societies might be drawn into these research groups and become better represented. This might also be a way of strengthening ties with UK universities and Research Councils. As a result, scholars who work in these areas might then better appreciate the enormous contributions that the existing British Academy-funded institutions continue to make to archaeological and historical research and publication by scholars and students based in the UK and elsewhere.

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