INSTITUTIONALISING RESEARCH UPTAKE AT 22 SUB-SAHARAN AFRICAN UNIVERSITIES

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What was the purpose of the study?

- To examine some RU mechanisms and practices that have emerged within a sample of 22 sub-Saharan African (SSA) universities.

- To explore research uptake management (RUM) as a new field of specialisation in research management.

- To provide a rationale for why it is becoming increasingly relevant within the higher education sector, both inside and outside Africa.

Why are the findings of this study useful?

- They propose a conceptual framework for strengthening RUM capacity based on an in-depth analysis of primary source material.

- They unpack existing capacity development needs across a selection of SSA universities, examining how universities are approaching the institutionalisation of RUM.

INTRODUCTION

Many African universities recognise the importance of supporting development through community service or via extension activities, and communicating research findings to a broader community is a vital component of this process. Yet, relationships between universities and off-campus parties are often strained. For this reason—and other contributing factors—research all too frequently fail to reach those who could benefit from it[1].

Academics and practitioners use many terms to describe the process by which knowledge generated through research finds its way to those who can make use of it, be they practitioners (health workers, farmers, engineers), policymakers, or interested members of the public. Terminology includes 'diffusion of innovations', 'technology transfer', 'research communication', 'research dissemination', 'knowledge utilisation', 'knowledge translation', 'knowledge mobilisation' and 'research into use'. In this case study, the term 'research uptake' (RU) encompasses the theories around all of the terms listed above.

In practice, RU affects a broad range of university units, including researchers, research boards, public relations offices, libraries, ICT and senior university managers, all working together to identify, produce and communicate research to the outside world. The people representing these offices need to communicate in various ways with potential consumers of research outputs. Universities need to manage this complex process throughout, making sure research processes

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[1] Kirkland, J., Coates, D., Mouton, J. 2010

and findings are accessible to a range of audiences, both within the university and beyond, across a variety of media.

While universities in Africa are aware of the importance of managing research, strategies and mechanisms to perform RU are lacking, as is the ability to assess its impact[2].

On the flipside, external stakeholders may be unaware of or naive about possible research resources available within universities, and/or may not have the capacity to use research once it becomes available. In Africa, further barriers often present themselves. These include inadequate intermediary structures, a lack of trust in local researchers, the de-institutionalisation of research and the influence donor organisations have on determining what and who gets funded—sometimes leading to a distortion of power in policymaking[3].

LITERATURE REVIEW

The study and practice of knowledge utilisation has evolved rapidly over the previous decades to emerge as a coherent and integrated body of scientific investigation[4].

In developing the proposed framework, this study leaned heavily on a review of available literature, in particular the findings of a review of 26 studies in the healthcare field, which analysed and categorised infrastructure components considered effective in knowledge transfer practices[5].

From the literature review, we have identified five focus areas integral to the RU process.

- Focus area 1: RU and the institutional research environment

- Focus area 2: Supporting knowledge production and RU processes

- Focus area 3: Promoting research through engagement (push factors)

- Focus area 4: Creating demand for research through engagement (pull factors)

- Focus area 5: Monitoring and evaluation activities

METHODOLOGY

Quantitative and qualitative data were collected over a two-and-a-half year period from 2012 to 2014 as a remit of the Development Research Uptake in Sub-Saharan Africa (DRUSSA) programme, a five-year initiative funded by UKAID[6]. This paper predominantly draws on the data and analysis of two benchmarking surveys, one carried out in 2012[7] and another in 2014[8]. The first surveyed 24 SSA universities across 12 countries, seeking information regarding existing practices, planned changes and identified challenges in implementing RU. Because of two of the universities merging and another withdrawing, the number of universities had changed to 22 by 2014.

Following the first benchmarking survey, participants undertook a collective prioritisation exercise, from which developed a set of 'Statements of Good Practice for Research Uptake'[9]. These statements are integral to the priorities identified for the implementation of RUM.

Over the following two years, campus workshops at each of the participating universities provided information about how the thinking about priorities and the various approaches to institutionalising RUM matured. Challenges and successes were tracked by means of a second benchmarking survey in 2014. Data collected from the campus

[2] Kirkland, J., Coates, D., Mouton, J. 2010
[3] Carden, 2009; Kirkland, J., Coates, D., Mouton, J., 2010
[4] Estabrooks et al, 2006; Rogers, 1995
[5] Ellen et al, 2011

[6] DfID, 2014
[7] Falk, Harle & Roberts, 2012
[8] (Falk, Harle & Roberts, 2014)
[9] Falk, Harle & Roberts, 2012

workshops and two benchmarking surveys form the basis of this study.

It is clear from the results that no single method exists by which good RU practice can be entrenched within an institution. Typically, a combination of university-specific initiatives, focusing on cultivating strengths and addressing weaknesses, would emerge. Exploring trends across the universities, we present a framework that similar institutions may use to strengthen RU and RUM within their own ranks.

RESULTS

The framework of five focus areas set out above illustrates results in the discussions that follow. The results listed below reflect:

First benchmark (2012): Priorities were identified to implement good research uptake practices at the beginning of the study. These are captured in the boxes preceding the discussion in each focus area.

Second benchmark (2014): This survey measured what steps had been taken, processes implemented, and successes and challenges recorded since the first benchmark. These are discussed in each section of the focus areas discussion

FOCUS AREA 1: RU AND THE INSTITUTIONAL RESEARCH ENVIRONMENT

Good practice priorities identified

- Strategies should be developed that reflect the need to produce findings for wider use.

- Research strategy documents should unequivocally acknowledge the importance of research for social, economic and development needs.

- Research strategies should clearly stipulate the need in for institutional support for RU activity.

- Detailed RU implementation guidelines should be developed at operational level for the implementation of policies by departments/faculties and academics.

- Institutions should collect sufficient information on RU activity to inform policy.
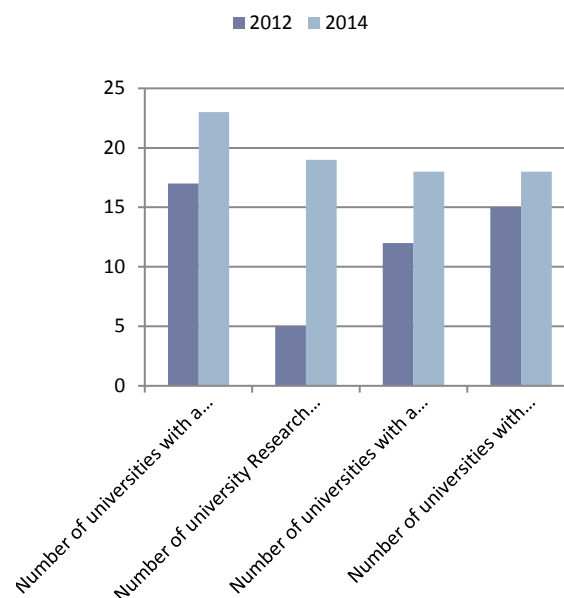
■ 2012 ■ 2014

Figure: Emergence of RU support structures at 22 universities (2012—2014)

The functions of teaching, research and community service receive unequal attention at universities, each competing for funds and time. Teaching is typically allocated a high or very high priority, followed by research, which, in turn, outranks community service when it comes to the allocation of resources. However, the results from the 2014 bench-mark showed a marked increase in the number of representatives who considered RU-related activities a high or very high priority, and this shift in attitude began to reflect in institutions' documentation.

What also emerged was a rise in the number of universities that now had formal science communication positions. It is important to bear in mind that RU is still in its infancy and much more resources (skills, knowledge, finance and political will) need to be assigned before it will become fully institutionalised.

## FOCUS AREA 2: SUPPORTING KNOWLEDGE PRODUCTION PROCESSES

Good practice priorities identified

- Institutions and RU practitioners should set realistic goals.

- RU responsibilities should be incorporated in academics' job descriptions, and expectations explicitly stipulated.

- Where training is required, this needs to be carefully scoped to achieve optimal impact and sustainability.

- Staff responsible for RU should have access to appropriate external expertise and designated budgets for internal and external RU activity, and they should be encouraged to network with other universities.

- Management and academics should take into account competing demands on academic time.

Interest in RU was strong among senior management in 2014, with RU foci incorporated into institutional policy documents and specialist roles for science communication assigned. Yet fewer than half of junior and senior academic staff members had acted on this interest. One of the reasons for this was a lack of institutional support, but other factors played a role too, including inadequate motivation, time constraints and inadequate research funding.

On the other hand, wider interest in RU began to emerge among a broader base of units across universities, including libraries, PR offices, and extension offices, among others, as is clear from the graph below.

Number of universities 2014   Number of universities 2012
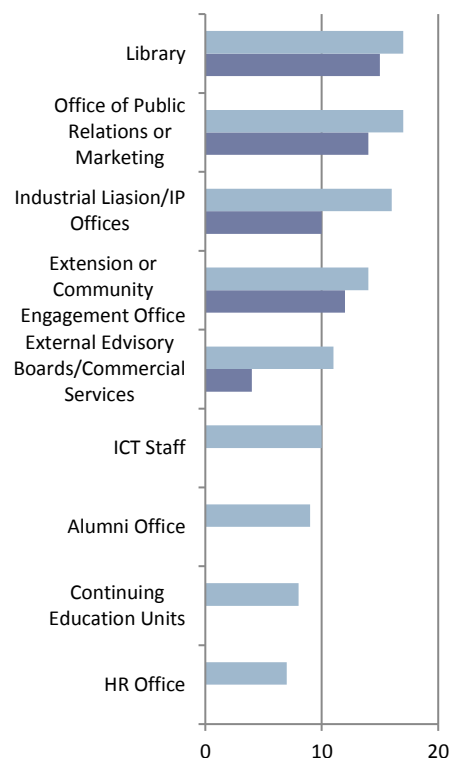
Universities with offices reporting an interest in RU activity 2012—2014

FOCUS AREA 3: PROMOTING RESEARCH THROUGH ENGAGEMENT (PUSH FACTORS)

Good practice priorities identified

- RU should be embedded in research and community service objectives, and included in staff induction and postgraduate training programmes.

- Clear processes should exist to determine where RU responsibility lies.

- Where RU responsibility is based across offices, clear mechanisms should be in place to meet and share information on research and RU activities.

- Clear processes should exist for decisions to be taken on support levels for RU.

- The effective maintenance of institutional research repositories

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allows an institution to identify what knowledge is being produced.

- Mechanisms should be in place to identify RU potential at an early stage.

- Information should be tailored for key target groups and audiences.

As stated earlier, no two institutions will practise RU activities in the same manner, and the channels and applications used to disseminate information vary from one university to the next. However, some activities and channels were common across the group. The most used channel was, unsurprisingly, conference papers, followed by a few external media channels such as print, TV, radio and social media, and internal channels such as websites and newsletters.
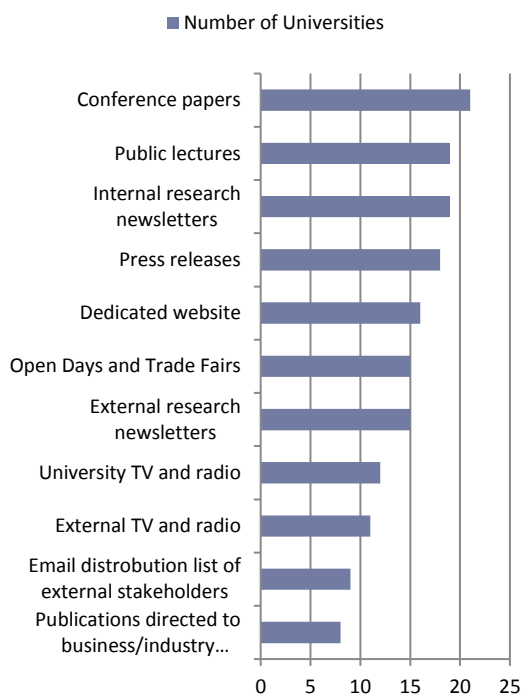

Figure: Research communication channels employed by universities (2014)

Of the 22 universities, 18 had central offices (PR or marketing and communications office) dedicated to disseminate research. However, only 10 of them had a communications strategy, although five were in the process of developing a strategy. While many of the staff employed in these offices had some training

and experience in areas such as PR, journalism and marketing and communications, only six held qualifications in science communication.
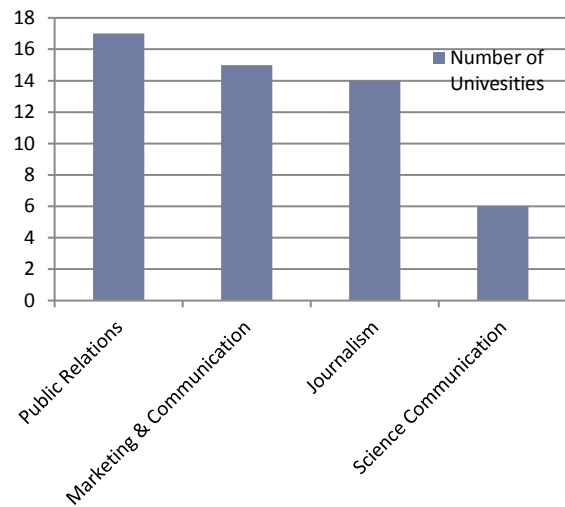

Figure: Universities with staff trained in specific areas of communication (2014

One positive development was that some universities had noted improved results in the communication of research results as a consequence of better communication between academics and communications staff. An academic from one of the institutions noted that research had enjoyed greater visibility, and that focus on research output had increased because of a closer relationship with the marketing department.

FOCUS AREA 4: CREATING DEMAND FOR RESEARCH THROUGH ENGAGEMENT (PULL FACTORS)

Good practice priorities identified

- Mechanisms should exist to ensure beneficiaries of research are aware of and, where appropriate, involved in assessing the potential of research at an early stage.

- Ad hoc engagement with end users should be converted into regular engagement that is incorporated into the research cycle.

- Institutions should ensure that academics have access to qualified experts to identify research suitable for RU.

- RU staff should be able to consult experts on the most appropriate timing and methods to make research known, and experts should be on hand to provide academics with support in the production and distribution of materials about their research.

Figure: Universities' priorities for external stakeholder engagement
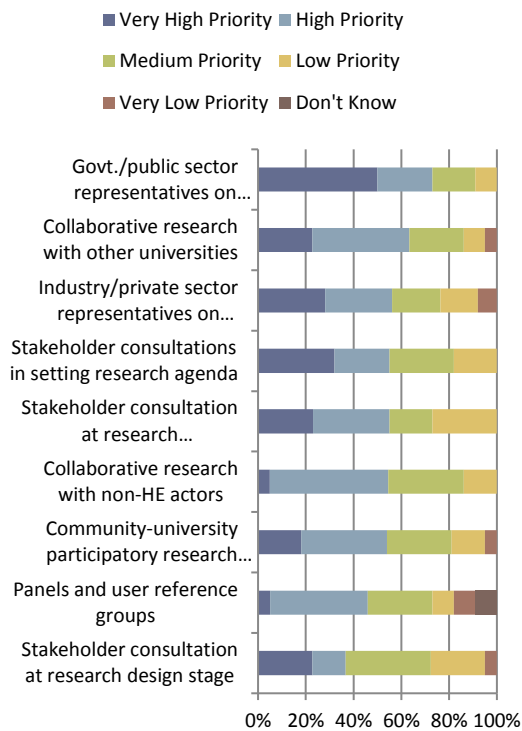
Universities used various methods to stimulate demand for research outputs among external stakeholders. Government and public sector engagement ranked highest, at 73%, followed by the private sector (64%). Collaborations with other universities also ranked 64%.

When it came to individual research projects, engagement activities tended to take place only at the end of projects, during the dissemination stage, with little activity during the design stage. Engaging with external parties during the design stage is usually the result of external pressure to do so, typically a demand by a funding agency.

Good practice priorities identified

- An institutional database for project-specific RU could benefit overall RU.

- Mechanisms should exist to improve external communication activities and review their effectiveness.

- Mandatory RU activity reporting in faculty and departmental meetings could be a means to scrutiny, while specific bodies or structures could be established to monitor progress against RU policies.

The second survey found that, in 2014, 75% of participating universities kept records of research activity by way of institutional repositories or annual reports. Some kept records of research in the library, research office or in specific departments or faculties. It found that 55% of participating universities did not keep records of research dissemination activities, thus had shown little progress in this respect over two years.

The universities who had begun to keep records of dissemination efforts reported noticeable changes, with more projects showing evidence of impact and uptake. Results showed that projects that showed evidence of impact and uptake stand a greater chance to attract further funding.

CONCLUSION AND RECOMMENDATIONS

Institutionalising RU at universities presents many challenges, among them the development of staff capacity, implementing mechanisms and processes, and maintaining support. Growing support for RU and its management is evident in the growing number

of policy and strategy documents that make provision for this, but the field is in its infancy, not only among this sample, but further afield in Africa, as well as globally. This trend is likely to continue as funding agencies, grant makers and other stakeholders continue to demand to see results for money spent.

Author's reflections

Analysing benchmarking surveys over the period 2012 to 2014 provided many insight in terms of how universities are starting to institutionalise Research Uptake Management.

Through the programme some statements of good practice has been defined which certainly is useful in terms of tracking progress and also guiding implementation

It has become quite clear that the DRUSSA universities are enthusiastically embracing these principles and have adjusted their implementation to local contexts.

The pursuit of some research on the Monitoring and Evaluation of how universities are achieving outcomes through implementing this will be an interesting follow-on project.