African universities strategize and struggle to research and make research matter

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Alioune Camara
Senior Program Specialist,
International Development Research Centre (IDRC) of Canada, Dakar

Kathryn Toure
Regional Director of the West and Central Africa Regional Office,
International Development Research Centre (IDRC) of Canada, Dakar

Knowing that the quality of university research impacts the quality of education at all levels, as well as shapes the overall landscape in which research happens, the International Development Research Centre (IDRC), through its West and Central Africa Regional Office (WARO), initiated a process to better understand what is actually happening when it comes to the governance of university research in the region. Findings to date are summarized in this document.

After decades of investment in primary and secondary education in Africa, higher education is receiving renewed attention and investment. Universities and regional institutions in West and Central Africa are attempting to make research better serve the university, the development of education in general, and wider society. These efforts include the development of research policies and research funds (including regional funds), the creation of offices or departments for research and cooperation, the development of strategic plans for research, incentive mechanisms for faculty, training for faculty and administrators in proposal writing, resource mobilisation, and partnership development and management. Notwithstanding these initiatives, data on the management of higher education – and of university research in particular – is scattered and often unavailable.

In a challenging global context in which higher education in increasingly privatised, universities often act in isolation as they try to boost the research sector. There is a need to support the creation of knowledge on the development of university research in African contexts and ensure that best practices are shared across institutions and countries. Such knowledge should inform national and regional research policies and programs, as well as negotiations with bilateral and multilateral partners investing in higher education.

At a roundtable on the role of universities in research for development organised by IDRC/WARO in Dakar, Senegal in December 2008, university researchers and administrators and development partners highlighted, among other issues, that university research suffers from a deficit of effective organisation and management. Not only is there lack of vision, appropriate policy frameworks and strategic planning, but also the lack of a service culture within the structures responsible for administering, coordinating, and promoting research. With heavy teaching responsibilities, professors have little time for research or prefer consultation work to improve their salaries. The state is reluctant to finance research, and lecturers are often reluctant to use for research the part of their salary allotted for research.

Universities are nonetheless seeking to break out of the isolation that has characterised them over recent decades, and to influence and connect research with national development priorities.

Situational analysis of the governance of university research in West and Central Africa

Subsequent to the roundtable, a situational analysis of the governance of university research was undertaken in six universities in five countries in West and Central Africa. These universities were: University of Abobo Adjamé in Côte d'Ivoire, University of Buea in Cameroon, Cheikh Anta Diop University and Gaston Berger University in Senegal, University of Ghana, and University of Ouagadougou in Burkina Faso.

Through a review of university documents, the collection of factual and statistical data using a questionnaire, and interviews with administrators, professors and students, university research governance was investigated in the following three areas: organisation of the research system, institutional steering of research, and management of structures and resources. The reports per university and the synthesis report were discussed and validated at a workshop organised in October 2009 in Dakar by university administrators, researchers, and development partners supporting higher education in Africa (such as UNESCO). The survey results and emerging research questions were also discussed at a workshop on leadership development organised by the Association of African Universities, also in October 2009 in Dakar. In addition, in November in Tunisia, education specialists of the African Development Bank discussed findings and their views on research gaps and needs.

Organisation of the research system

As regards the organisation of research, it was notable that in most cases, universities lack documented and clear guidelines for organising the research system. The same applies to the criteria for accreditation of research units. Research units proliferate, yet the interactions among them are limited. However, university faculty and staff are increasingly aware of the overly informal nature of existing research units, and attempts to provide common guidelines for establishing and managing research units, without killing initiative, are underway.

Institutional steering of research

All the universities surveyed have decision-making bodies for research issues. However, one of the main characteristics of these entities is their limited influence on research. Scientific councils, meant to play a crucial role in driving research and providing technical support, struggle to do so but are often relegated to routine or secondary tasks. The lack of financial resources is often cited to explain their limited influence on research teams and laboratories established by researchers on their own.

Most universities have no mechanisms for setting research priorities. Even if universities are developing research agendas or implementing strategic plans, there is no evidence, with the exception of the University of Buea, demonstrating the influence of the plans. In the absence of the strategic steering of research by governments and universities, taking into account the social demand for research, researchers have been carrying out their research, whether individually or collectively, primarily to meet their own particular interests and secondarily to meet the requirements of external partners with their own respective research agendas.

These research processes, however, are rarely evaluated by the university. Existing evaluation mechanisms and practices most often only review specific projects in relation to the criteria of the funding institution. There is a need to implement mechanisms for evaluating research units and to foster a culture of evaluation.

Management of research structures and resources

On the operational management of university research, all surveyed universities have administrative and accounting procedures and manuals that are followed relatively closely. However, the existing tools do not generally address the specificities of research. Moreover, the independent management of laboratories and research centres without common guidelines weakens the system and may lead to all kinds of uncontrollable deviations.

In recent years, working conditions for researchers have improved but remain a concern in some cases. Professors and other lecturers complain of poor working environments, low salaries, and inadequately equipped laboratories. Research at most universities competes with high teaching loads and external demands such as consultancies and teaching at private institutions. This leaves little time and energy to devote to doctoral students and research.

Ethical and professional conduct issues are being discussed at Cheikh Anta Diop University and at University of Buea. The former intends to put in place an ethics committee, drawing on the experience of the National Ethics Committee for Health Research (CNERS) in Senegal. This Committee reviews research proposals submitted for its assessment and formulates opinions and recommendations on ethical challenges and other societal and scientific issues.

Linking with national development priorities and responding to social demands for research

The application of research results remains one of the major weaknesses identified of applied research processes in the surveyed universities. This is due in part to the lack of regard for national

development priorities and social demands when conceptualising research projects. In general, researchers reported enormous difficulties in sharing and valorising their research results, due to the lack of appropriate scientific and technical support and suitable institutional environments. Certain initiatives do exist to valorise knowledge and research, for example via incubators at Cheikh Anta Diop University. Partnerships with the private sector in this regard are being experimented at University of Buea.

Despite the difficulties universities face in undertaking quality research, promising practices and strategies are emerging and deserve support and attention. Universities are developing initiatives for autonomous funding of research through various mechanisms such as research support funds or competitive funds for research and innovation. They are also creating mechanisms and opportunities for greater openness to the public, communities, and users. The establishment of multidisciplinary and inter-faculty doctoral schools is contributing to more interactions among researchers and students. Similarly, increased inter-university cooperation through networks and regional programs is contributing to the development of synergies.

University research as part of the national innovation system

The situational analysis undertaken by African researchers in six universities has contributed to identify the following major challenges for improving the governance of university research:
- a more adequate institutional **framework at the national level** for the definition and communication of research priorities;
- more **synergies** amongst the actors involved in national innovation systems;
- **institutional support** to research centres and laboratories and the development of synergies amongst research teams;
- continuous consultation and **dialogue with users** of research;
- inventories and **evaluations** of research conducted within the university;
- effective mechanisms for **funding** research;
- professionalization of and **training** in research management and administration.

In terms of perspectives, IDRC/WARO intends to support national institutions and professional associations to address the concerns expressed by university administrators and researchers. In this vein, interests converge around the need for knowledge production on the contribution of university research to dynamic national and regional innovation systems capable of addressing local needs and national development priorities in West and Central Africa.

For additional reading on the governance of university research in Africa, see authors such as Bernard Fonlon and Edme Michel Zinsou (social responsibility of the university), Abdoulaye Niang (obstacles francophone universities in Africa face), Paulin Hountondji (extraversion of African research and the need for the re-appropriation of endogenous knowledge) and Mammo Muchie (national innovation systems). Consult the results of the situational analysis in West and Central Africa and other reports and papers on the subject at www.idrc.ca/fr/ev-147729-201-1-DO_TOPIC.html.