

Chapter 1.1

The Contribution of International Donors to African Research Management

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Abstract

The case of Africa is important in understanding the growth of research management as a profession. Africa has rapidly increased its research output in recent years, and its institutions are increasingly in demand as research partners. Yet research management structures have developed from a very low base, and need not be confined by past practice. Through the Southern African Research and Innovation Management Association (SARIMA), it has been represented since the origins of International Networks of Research Management Societies (INORMS). Several external donors have sought to help build research management structures on the continent, and the success (or otherwise) of these initiatives can tell us much about the potential for common research management structures globally.

This chapter does not provide a comprehensive account of progress over the past two decades, or a complete list of relevant initiatives. Rather, it reflects on whether international assistance and collaboration have made a meaningful contribution to the progress that has been made, and its strengths and limitations. It considers how far growth would have happened regardless of funder intervention, or indeed whether international partners have inhibited progress by prioritising their own norms and priorities. It asks uncomfortable questions for funders about the way in which they plan and evaluate their work.

Keywords: Africa; research management; profession; professional development; international support; impact

The Emerald Handbook of Research Management and Administration Around the World, 17–26



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The Nature of International Support

International funders showed little interest in African research management before the turn of the century. There were two reasons for this. First, research management was itself a relatively new concept globally. Second, research management was only meaningful in the context of an active research community. Apart from South Africa, universities throughout the sub-Saharan region had experienced two decades of economic decline that would be unimaginable to most of us in the North. Reversing this decline had not been seen as a priority for international funders. Led by World Bank analysis that purported to show lower rates of return from investment than other sectors, higher education was starved of investment. Domestic budgets prioritised higher education more highly, but were not sufficient to maintain a vibrant research culture.

The need to develop such a culture motivated the Carnegie Corporation of New York to include research management in its portfolio of support for selected African institutions from around 2003. The steer for this came from the institutions themselves, and fitted into a wider desire of Carnegie to promote self-sufficiency; other strands of support, for example, included measures to develop fundraising and development arms within universities. Unlike many donors, Carnegie was able to commit to a medium-term time horizon – a 10-year programme – although with interim reviews which altered the precise number of institutions involved. Their support was concentrated on between 5 and 10 institutions during that period.

Carnegie found a natural delivery partner in the Society of Research Administrators (SRA), a well-established professional body in the field of research management. Based in North America, SRA was keen to advance its role as a global organisation, replicating the growth of the Council for Advancement and Support of Education. From the 1990s, SRA had invested in supporting delegates from developing countries to attend its annual conferences, partially in the hope that this might lead to the establishment of national chapters.

Another membership organisation, the London-based Association of Commonwealth Universities (ACU), developed an interest in research management from 2000, when its Council approved a small allocation of funding for a programme in the area. ACU's motivation differed from that of the SRA, since its membership was institutional, rather than individual, and it already had a large number of members in developing countries. Its aim was to develop new services for existing members (and by doing so ensure retention and promote expansion). Research management seemed an ideal way of achieving this objective, since it was an area of common interest to both developing and developed countries, and one where even the most established research institutions felt they had much to learn.

Not being a major funder in its own right, the ACU focussed its early activity on the creation of an effective network, through which institutions in different parts of the world could talk to each other and compare ideas. A benchmarking event for institutions in Southern Africa, held in Durban in 2001 ([Stackhouse et al., 2001](#)), provided a trigger for delegates to take forward the establishment of their own organisation, which was founded as the SARIMA the following year. The fledgling organisation quickly developed a presence on the international stage, being represented at the meeting that agreed to form the International Networks of Research Management Societies (INORMS) later in the year. ACU established a Global Research Management Network, primarily for its 500 member institutions, but open to others. Its hard-copy magazine *Research Global*, provided an early vehicle for international communication, and the basis for surveying current trends ([Stackhouse, 2008](#); [Stackhouse & Day, 2005](#)).

In 2005, the theme of networking was taken further, in an intensive face-to-face exercise which involved institutions from 12 countries, including South Africa, India and China, together with more conventional developed country representatives (Kirkland et al., 2006).

The International Support During the 2000s

International funder interest in research management in Africa increased throughout the following decade. This reflected an increased profile for international development – which had been placed at the centre of the G7 summit in 2005 – and increased confidence in higher education as a means of delivering development. The publication of *Peril and Promise* (Task Force on Higher Education & Society, 2000) which reflected a shift in World Bank thinking represented a critical element in this regard. As the decade progressed two other factors supported this trend – recognition that global issues such as climate change required active participation and engagement with Africa, and that higher education and science could play an important role in facilitating ‘soft diplomacy’. As African economies expanded, there was recognition that affinity with its science and innovation base could bring trade benefits.

Some funders recognised a link between effective research management within recipient institutions and accountability. The US National Institutes of Health, Wellcome Trust and UK Medical Research Councils all supported the development of the function in centres that they supported in Africa. The then UK Department for International Development (DFID), following proposals by the ACU, saw the potential for stronger research management systems to support wider objectives. In 2000, they funded a small feasibility for sharing technology transfer expertise within the South and East African regions, involving ACU and the University of Cape Town. From 2004, they supported the *Research Africa* project to establish an Africa-specific service to help African research managers identify and access international funding. The project involved a commercial partner (which later evolved into the *Research Professional* service), and the now firmly established SARIMA. It was extended three years later, with additional support from the Swedish agency SIDA. In 2009, DFID supported a collaboration between the University of Stellenbosch, ACU and a South African consultancy to undertake a scoping study on the role on how universities could support the Communication of Research for Utilisation. This demonstrated significant demand within the sector, and led to the establishment of the larger project on Development Research Uptake in Sub-Saharan Africa (DRUSSA), delivered by the same partners but involving over 20 universities throughout the continent. DRUSSA was itself extended in 2013, with a further grant to support policy engagement structures amongst public sector agencies to work with universities.

These latter awards extended beyond narrowly defined research management, but highlighted the importance of involving it in a holistic process to ensure the maximum impact of university research for society. Other grants aimed to develop research management in its own right. An award from the UK Department of Education and Science sought to replicate the success of SARIMA by supporting the establishment of a West African Research Management and Innovation Association (WARIMA). The European Union, through its Africa, Caribbean and Pacific Directorate in 2009 contributed over three million euro to a three-year project on Research and Innovation Management in Africa and the Caribbean, led by SARIMA but bringing together the Universities of Botswana, Dar es Salaam, Buea, Ibadan, the University of Technology Jamaica, Research Africa and the ACU.

More recent years have seen strengthened collaboration between donors, and an increased emphasis on developing professional standards. After an external review of African research management, the Wellcome Trust in 2018 funded the establishment of the Research Management Programme in Africa (ReMPro Africa) based on four interconnected strands of activity – leadership, sustainability, standards and training. Five other donors were attracted to the programme, which was initially hosted at the Nairobi-based African Academy of Sciences. Leading health donors, under the auspices of ESSENCE, came together to produce a ground-breaking publication in 2010 which defined and promoted good practice in ensuring that developing country universities received proper indirect costs from their externally funded programmes.

As professional research bodies in the UK and Europe have developed their own professional standards frameworks, SARIMA instigated an initiative to promote professional standards in an African context – the International Professional Recognition Council. This attracted support from the World Health Organisation. The South African National Research Foundation has joined with IDRC, the Canadian Development Agency and UK Foreign Commonwealth and Development Office (the successor to DFID) to support the Science Granting Councils Initiative, to support professionalisation of the research process at the national level across Africa.

Trends and Pointers

Capacity development initiatives are often characterised as being at three levels – system, institutional and individual. The projects mentioned above embrace all three, however the most common approach has been to support the development of sustainable structures within research producer institutions. Training of individuals has largely assumed that these will go on to contribute to institutional structures, and the developers of new products, such as those designed under the *Research Africa* initiative, assumed that research management structures would be in place to create a market for their services.

Emphasis on institutional structures required a top-down approach, given the low research base from which African universities started the century. It also reflected global practice. Research management structures in most regions were instigated from the top in response to external pressures. As the profession develops this emphasis might change. Research management professionals in Africa are increasingly talking to their peers both within the continent and internationally. The growth of research partnerships with northern institutions may lead to pressure from African researchers to receive the same level of support as their partners. As the profession becomes more established, one would expect more emphasis on the development of individuals, benchmarking and new structures, the terms under which research takes place and the wider systems to support it. Research managers can play an increasing role in these discussions.

The design of funder initiatives reflected changing perceptions of need. Early interventions may have underestimated the differences between donor countries and Africa. In Africa, research management was seen as a route to developing research more widely. In the north, this more pro-active element was balanced by a desire to ensure that the risks of existing research activity were well managed, with emphasis on mechanisms to ensure that institutions were not disadvantaged through unfavourable contract conditions or lost intellectual property.

Early support typically saw research management as encompassing a defined set of functions, which were broadly the same globally. However, institutions still seeking to

develop their research core had different boundaries and priorities from those with an established research presence. The components of research management are likely to be broader, extending to the training and resourcing of research staff and provision of basic infrastructure. Developing countries were also more likely to favour a definition of research management which embraces all the resources available for research at the institution. In some developed countries, research management offices were established primarily to deal with externally funded research, although functions may have since broadened, for example, to meet the needs of the research assessment exercise in the UK.

The ACU responded to the need for common definitions in 2005, defining research management as ‘any activity instigated at the level of the institution which seeks to add value to the research activity of staff, without being part of the research process itself’ (Kirkland, 2005a, p. 156). Later work, such as the British Academy funded ‘Nairobi Report’ highlighted the potential links between research management and staff development, which would be regarded as a separate function in most northern institutions, by arguing that both needed to be seen as part of a coherent institutional strategy (Harle, 2009).

Early initiatives were less likely to question the nature of relationships between developing and developed country partners. More recently, there has been recognition of the formal and informal biases that can exist. Research management does not create these, but it can exacerbate them. At the proposal generation stage, a situation where academics in one institution are closely supported by proposal development professionals, whilst those in the other are merely required to obtain institutional ‘sign off’ at the final stage, can lead to inequity in the allocation of tasks and resources. At the contract negotiation stage, imbalance in negotiating power can lead to inequity in ownership or obligations. At the project management stage, inequity in research management can lead to unfair allocation of credit between partners. For these reasons, the existence of comparable research management support is essential to equitable research partnerships more generally.

Research relationships also need to respond to the concept and language of decolonisation. There is a need to consider whether initiatives promote values and language that are essentially northern. The language of this debate is relatively new, but the dilemma that it exposes is not. In their 2005 article, Stackhouse and Day highlighted very different growth patterns between region.

On the one hand, it is clear that research management processes need to reflect local needs and capabilities. On the other, academic research has become more competitive and project based on a global basis, and some common basis of expertise will be needed to succeed in this environment. (Kirkland, 2005b, p. 153)

At a time when most north–south collaboration is funded from northern sources, this dilemma remains. As the volume and profile of research collaboration grow, funders are concerned that African institutions should be accountable for expenditure and performance in the same way as northern ones. Yet African institutions may not have the same input into the setting of priorities and project design, or be allowed by funder regulations to act as lead partners.

Funding bodies concerned by the need to balance accountability with equity, such as UK Research and Innovation (UKRI), have responded by placing the emphasis for ensuring that relationships are equitable onto their grantee institutions. This has

created an environment in which equity is taken seriously amongst developed country partners, and the individuals within them that have responsibility for negotiating and implementing collaboration agreements. One response by funders has been to develop closer relationships between research managers in Africa and developed countries, with the aim of developing greater understanding of the needs of their respective institutions. The International Research Management Staff Development Programme, supported by RemPRO in partnership with the UK Association of Research Managers, was an example of this approach.

A recent report from ESSENCE and the UK Collaborative for Development Research (ESSENCE & UKCDR, 2022) suggests, however, that delegation to northern institutions should not be seen as a long-term solution. The creation of a situation in which one partner has responsibility for ensuring the other is treated equitably creates a potential conflict of interest. Equity ultimately requires that both parties have equal negotiating ability from the outset. The report identifies four key stands of activity to developing equitable research partnerships, to which research management is critical.

Evidence of Impact

African research management has progressed significantly over the past two decades. The twentieth anniversary publication by SARIMA demonstrates a confident, sustainable organisation providing training and other services throughout the region. A review of three leading African Universities commissioned by the ReMPro Africa programme confirms that ‘all three institutions, albeit with slight adjustments in scope, have strong functional research management and support offices’. In a broader context, it confirmed that ‘in the past decade, there has been a gradual effort from many countries to elevate the support of research within their research institutions and universities’ (Science for Africa Foundation, forthcoming, p. 15).

What contribution has external funding programmes made to this progress? Reports and evaluations of funders themselves are unlikely to provide a comprehensive answer. Even assuming their objectivity, it is important to recognise that funding has been provided generally on a time limited, project basis. Evaluations often address a relatively narrow range of questions, related to the use of resources and short-term targets. The level of investment has been modest by the standards of major donors, and even the budgets of recipient institutions.

In these circumstances, it has not been seen as important to maintain contact with key participants after project completion, to maintain networks that have been created or examine whether the project influenced long-term behaviour or structures. The short-time horizons of donors in evaluating their investments inhibit long-term understanding of their impact. We can, however, draw on anecdotal evidence about the extent of donor involvement, and suggest some lessons that donors might apply in any future support.

A few products of donor involvement remain. There is no longer a distinct *Research Africa* product, which was the intention of the DFID investment from 2004, but the global product that it was part of still contains a small African strand that would otherwise probably not exist. Funders played a catalytic role in the development of SARIMA, which has become a permanent force for the development of research management across the continent, although its leading instigators were South African and the organisation would probably have developed in some form anyway. WARIMA, a more direct product of donor intervention, still exists but cannot claim the same level of activity as its Southern neighbour.

Funder initiatives sought to develop stronger structures at institutional level. The ReMPro study confirms that these have developed, at least in the highest tier of African institutions, but no analysis exists to evaluate the extent of attribution. A decade on, it is unlikely that the institutional memory would exist to inform such a study. In the cases of the University of Ghana and Makerere (the University of Cape Town had a functioning research office from the outset of our study period), the ReMPro study indicates that current officers were the product of new research strategies agreed in 2012 and 2013 respectively – a period when they would have been receiving donor support – and that change has been largely top-down in nature, which suggest that donors might have played some role in agenda setting, if not implementation. The study also found that ‘research management leadership in all three universities indicate that they have situated the leadership in line with best practice from leading universities across the globe’, which suggests some international influence (Science for Africa Foundation, forthcoming, p. 22).

The three institutions were asked to identify influences on recent capacity development. These will be analysed by the RemPRO team in detail, but include several references to international sources, such as ‘attendance at trainings organized by WARIMA, SARIMA, SRA and INORMS’, participation in the CAPREX program with the University of Cambridge, study tours to the USA to increase understanding of NIH systems, the DRUSSA program on research uptake, capacity initiatives through collaborative partners such as Johns Hopkins University partnership, and the IREX (International Research and Exchanges Board), as part of the UASP programme of Carnegie. All were recognised as contributing to capacity growth in some form.

Yet the likelihood is that specific donor investments in research management have played only a minor role in its growth. As in northern countries, this has been a gradual process. Most donor involvement, by contrast, has been confined by time and/or to a very limited range of institutions. Where donor involvement has had impact, this is more likely to have been in raising the profile of research management as an issue, legitimising it as a priority topic and getting in onto the agenda of institutional leaders.

The importance of agenda setting should not be underestimated. We have noted that research management has been largely introduced in a ‘top-down’ manner. In Africa, as in the north, the concept has also encountered resistance from those who believe that ‘research management’ is best undertaken by researchers themselves. Thus, the idea of finding individuals to champion change – such as the Vice-Chancellor visits promoted by Carnegie in their early support and the requirement that institutions nominate their own champions by DRUSSA – had merit. However, the process has been cumulative, usually extending beyond the tenures of individuals. Few projects that can point to their specific investments as directly leading to identifiable, discrete change.

What can funders learn from their experience, and how can such lessons be applied in future? Having recognised that research management required change at the institutional level, donors tended to underestimate the time required for such change. Programmes to promote top-down change created a reliance on senior staff (often at Vice-Chancellor or DVC level) to lead action. Lack of time, a shortage of more junior staff to delegate to and cumbersome decision-making processes all acted as constraints on the speed at which this could be delivered. The establishment of new research management structures needed to take its place amongst competing demands (Kirkland, 2009, p. 35).

Expectations of change underestimated the size and complexity of African institutions. Many of these are highly devolved in nature, with a strong culture of research

taking place at individual and small group levels. This last factor was exacerbated in Africa by two decades of decline in universities and their central resource for research, which had strengthened the power of numbers of successful researchers to operate with independence from their institutions. This is combined with a (global) scepticism from researchers about the capacity of ‘managers’ to contribute to the delivery of research.

A further characteristic of donor engagement has been a focus on larger, more established research institutions. Individually, it is understandable that funders should concentrate on those institutions that deliver most research in the short term, and with whom they have the strongest relationships. These are sometimes regarded as ‘safer’ investments from the perspective of audit and accountability. One consequence of this concentration has been a degree of overlap between initiatives at the same institution. Larger research-based universities argue that by creating centres of excellence, funders can create a ‘trickle down’ effect in which lead universities raise standards elsewhere. Evidence submitted by the University of Ghana to the ReMPro report provides some evidence of this happening, with staff from their Office of Research and Innovation Development sharing good practice with other universities in the region. However, it is not clear how widespread this practice is. One would expect that over time the range of institutions involved in funder initiatives to broaden, in line with the growth of research on the continent more generally.

Some donors have been reluctant to align the principles being promoted through research management with their own practice as funders. One example of this is the calculation and payment of indirect costs on research awards. Two reports compiled on behalf of health research funders ([ESSENCE on Health Research, 2012, 2020](#)), support the view that universities should receive the full cost of their research work. In practice, funders have been much slower to adopt this principle in Africa than in other regions. Reasons advanced for this have included federal regulations (in the case of the United States) and the perceived need for clarity on how recipient institutions calculate and spend revenues. The issue of how to account for resources and facilities that have been core funded by national governments remains an important issue holding back indirect cost rates in Africa compared with northern countries. In some cases, too, donors have argued that their support to African institutions is intended for capacity-building purposes, rather than in return for specific research results, and should thus be seen as a grant rather than a fully costed contract.

Finally, the tendency to support research management through fixed-term project grants has produced an emphasis on short-term evaluation. The formal objectives of such projects have often been expressed in terms that are easy to measure – for example the production of policies or establishment of new structures. However, the long-term contribution of grants to change, for example by legitimising research management, helping it on to the agenda of institutional leaders and introducing recipients to their peers elsewhere, may be larger. Donor institutions are unlikely to see such benefit since their evaluation normally takes place only during the life of the project. It is even possible that some donors will have no record of the research management projects that they have funded in the past.

A Model for Future Support

Twenty years after international donors began to recognise the importance of African research management, there remains a need for continuing involvement. In the next decade, this is likely to be driven by three factors. The continuing growth of African

research will increase the number of individuals and institutions needing such support. As donors interact with a wider range of African institutions, they will see the need for robust research management mechanisms to support their own accountability systems. As debates over equity and decolonisation develop, research management will be seen to have a wider strategic value, as a tool through which African institutions can identify and safeguard their own interests. Whilst the desire of funders and developed country partners to protect African institutions in the terms and conditions of their research agreements is real and desirable, this should be a step towards a situation in which African institutions can negotiate their own terms on an equal basis.

The mechanisms through which donors can offer support will need to change from those of the past two decades. Donors should seek to collaborate more with each other, to avoid a duplication in initiatives. As the volume of African research grows, so will the range of institutions at which robust systems are required. To meet this demand, donors might shift focus away from supporting change at specific institutions, to supporting systems and networks that facilitate change, learning and the development of recognised professional standards. Strong national fora, or regular professional contact between African research managers and their peers might provide a catalyst for all of these, as well as a means through which a genuinely African agenda for the profession can be articulated.

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