

ACU Spotlight

Investing in the next generation of researchers

Policy and Programmes Unit

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As universities seek to strengthen their role in knowledge production and innovation, a transition needs to be made from focusing on student numbers to creating an enabling environment for the early career academics who will shape the future direction of higher education. A new report from the ACU in partnership with the British Academy explores what good practice in support for early career researchers looks like, and makes a number of recommendations for where institutional investment may best be targeted.

Key points

- There is currently insufficient investment in support for early career academics, which has had a negative impact on teaching and research quality.
- Institutions need to invest in the frameworks and policies that will provide opportunities for early career academics to develop and broaden their skillset.
- The institutional approach should consider the needs of early career researchers and their managers, institutional priorities, and the broader research environment.
- Where resources are limited, support needs to be targeted, a case needs to be made for the value of this investment, and innovative approaches may be considered to maximise institutional capacity.

As countries seek to strengthen their position within the global knowledge economy, research and development plays an increasing role in national development strategies. Higher education is rapidly changing as it becomes ever more closely linked to economic development.

Student enrolment has risen dramatically in many developing countries – a positive indication of the importance being given to an educated and innovative society.¹ The change in sub-Saharan Africa has been particularly dramatic, with growth in student numbers outstripping that of all other regions over the past four decades.² However, in many countries on the continent, there are still significant gaps in the resources needed to make the transition from quantity to quality, from a focus

on student numbers to quality in the education and research outputs that are delivered. This has led to a cycle of higher student to staff ratios, increased pressure on staff, poorer teaching as a result, and reduced staff capacity to dedicate to improving research and teaching standards.³ In sub-Saharan Africa there are, on average, 50% more students per lecturer than the global average.⁴ In Kenya, for example, the student to lecturer ratio is, on average, 500:1.⁵

There is a lack of investment in developing staff skills and research capacity both at national and institutional levels. Institutions lack the policies and frameworks needed to best target the limited resources that they have. With no specific policies in place to target resources, opportunities often

¹ www.britishcouncil.org/voices-magazine/universities-are-heart-africas-economic-rise

² www.uis.unesco.org/Library/Documents/fs10-trends-tertiary-education-sub-saharan-africa-2010-en.pdf

³ www.britishcouncil.org/voices-magazine/universities-are-heart-africas-economic-rise

⁴ www.britishcouncil.org/sites/default/files/graduate_employability_in_ssa_final-web.pdf

⁵ www.theguardian.com/global-development-professionals-network/2015/jul/29/kenyas-shuttling-lecturers-university-shortages-are-taking-toll

bypass junior staff members and those traditionally marginalised within the system. This has led to a gap in human resources, as senior staff retire and junior staff do not have the incentives or skills to replace them. In countries such as South Africa, specific measures are being put in place to rebalance the demographic profile of staff to encourage more early career researchers from different ethnicities. Other examples include the African Women in Agricultural Research and Development (AWARD) programme,⁶ where training and support has been specifically targeted to developing the leadership skills of promising female researchers, and the Consortium for Advanced Research Training in Africa (CARTA)⁷ and the Malaria Capacity Development Consortium (MCDCC)⁸ programmes, which have focused on increasing the number of doctoral graduates.

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If an institution wants to become a future research leader, it needs to encourage an active and supportive research culture. A culture where it is possible for early career researchers to take control of their own development and build the holistic skillset needed to seek out and engage with the opportunities and challenges associated with high-level research.

The Nairobi Process

The Nairobi Process is an ongoing series of discussions, facilitated by the ACU and the British Academy, around Africa-UK research collaboration and the provision of researcher support in African higher education.

Following a number of consultations with African and UK scholars in 2009, the first of a series of reports was published. The *Nairobi Report* featured an initial broad analysis of the challenges facing the African humanities and social sciences community, including issues around governance, the role of networks and partnerships, and the importance of investing in early career researchers. In a second report, *Foundations for the Future*, the focus was narrowed to examine the issues faced in doctoral training for early career staff at African institutions.

The recommendations from these two reports were instrumental in the design and development of two ACU-led programmes which have sought to tackle some of the challenges highlighted by the Nairobi

Process: Structured Training for African Researchers (STARS),⁹ and Climate Impacts Research Capacity and Leadership Enhancement (CIRCLE).¹⁰

With both programmes at a stage where lessons can be taken from their implementation, and with growing debate over and interest in support for early career researchers, a new study was launched to draw on insights from CIRCLE and STARS and the actors involved in providing early career support.

The third report in the series – *The next generation: Ideas and experience in African researcher support* – was published in April 2016,¹¹ and explores what good practice in researcher support for early career academics looks like from the perspective of institutions and donors. It aims to provide a framework for institutions to reflect on their research provision and the options that they may consider employing, depending on their own particular needs.

The case to invest

Producing quality research is a core objective for most universities, but this can only be achieved if investment is made in those responsible for research production. The faculty represent the core intellectual capital of the university, central to the delivery of research, teaching, community engagement, and academic networks, as well as a raft of other responsibilities. Researchers should therefore be considered just as vital, if not more so, than the more tangible resources, such as infrastructure or equipment, that a research institution may prioritise.

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Some investment, therefore, needs to be devoted to establishing the systems and processes to build the research capacity of the institution via its emerging talent. Feedback from institutional representatives suggests that a role also needs to be given to dedicated staff to manage, monitor, and advocate for ongoing support for early career researchers to both internal and external institutional stakeholders.

⁶ www.awardfellowships.org

⁷ <http://cartafrica.org/about-carta>

⁸ www.mcdconsortium.org/what-we-do

⁹ www.acu.ac.uk/stars

¹⁰ www.acu.ac.uk/circle

¹¹ www.acu.ac.uk/nairobi-process

Where resources are constrained, a case needs to be made for the value of investing in researcher support. This support needs to be developed to build skills and competencies that are relevant to the institutional strategy. At the same time, institutions need to be aware of the broader research funding and employment market, so that their staff are trained with the ability to tailor their research and teaching to meet external demand.

Institutionalising support systems

Consideration needs to be given to how resources can be best targeted. The findings of *The next generation* report suggest that the institution should first consider how early career researchers are defined, and how this fits with their institutional strategy for targeting researcher support. For example, choosing who to support based on age, length of service, or qualifications would determine a particular profile of researcher who receives support. A framework can then be developed that sets ongoing incentives and objectives for early career staff and their managers to address their career development needs.

Setting an institutional approach to early career researcher support can help shape the research culture so that it is valued by staff at all stages of their career. This can ensure that promising early career academics retain their motivation, and incentivise them to continue their development and strengthen their productivity. Furthermore, it can help retain talented staff and bridge the gap between early career and more established academics.

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With a talented, motivated, and cohesive staff culture, there is greater potential for the innovation that higher education needs to actively engage in global debate and the capacity needed to train the academic stars of the future.

Priorities for support

The role of the existing generation of established researchers in shaping the new generation of emerging researchers came out strongly in the report. Setting up an effective system for linking early career researchers to academic mentors, and training senior staff in the skills to mentor effectively may be a key initial step, even where resources are particularly limited. Senior or even retired academics can play an important role not just in

steering technical research skills development, but also in imparting the softer skills required to be an effective research communicator. Training for researchers should also explore the broader skillset that early career researchers need, in addition to specific technical competencies.

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Investing to allow researchers to take the time to develop these skills may take a broader shift in institutional culture, which will need to be integrated from the top down. Unless researchers are granted the remit to invest in themselves, experience suggests that they are unlikely to be afforded the time away from existing responsibilities.

Maximising resources

Where resources are scarce, value for money can be a key determinant of which institutional processes are given priority. *The next generation* report, therefore, emphasises the link between provision for early career researchers and its value for money in terms of investment of resources.

Investment should be targeted and managed as effectively as possible, and there are also opportunities to make innovative use of available resources. Several options are considered in the report, including how early career researcher support can be integrated into broader (and specific) funding applications, the use of MOOCs and blended learning to extend capacity, and the potential to pool resources between institutions and centres.

Key recommendations

Knowing and shaping your context

- Defining who to target as an early career researcher in the context of institutional and local needs
- Reviewing existing approaches and identifying gaps
- Linking early career researcher development and institutional priorities
- Linking early career researcher development and external priorities

Establishing institutional structures and resources

- Staff dedicated to early career researcher development
- Ongoing professional development of support staff for researcher development
- A clear framework for career progression
- Recognising early career researcher development in staff review and promotion criteria
- A strategy for the monitoring and evaluation of researcher support, with early career researchers defined within this
- Developing or adapting tools to facilitate the monitoring of career objectives

Priorities for researcher support

- Embedding mentoring into the institutional culture
- Time out for researcher development
- Training in hard and soft skills

Making the most of limited resources

- Using MOOCs and blended learning
- Developing networks and centres of excellence to pool resources, share support and skills, and facilitate mobility for early career researchers
- Incorporating early career researcher support into funding proposals

Conclusions

Increasing value is given to research as an important output for higher education, and for society more broadly. However, this has not yet translated to a transition in institutional culture where research productivity and quality is sufficiently prioritised or supported.

The next generation report makes the case for investing in early career researchers as a vital academic resource for delivering cutting-edge research. To do this, it suggests investing in the systems and processes that can support researchers to explore a more holistic development pathway.

To read the full report, visit:

www.acu.ac.uk/nairobi-process

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