



Developing and Promoting Multilateral South – South Higher Education Institute Research in Africa



Executive Summary

Historically, Africa Higher Education Institutes (HEIs) have relied on links with European and North American partners to undertake development and research projects which have often been subject to donor driven agendas. As such, the capacity of many academics in African HEIs to undertake research specific to environmental health in Africa has declined, and with it the importance of African led research in the development of policy and programmes. The Africa Academy for Environmental Health (AAEH), through a successful pan African network recommend that all HEIs and funding bodies should actively encourage the support and set up of pan African based (South-South) HEI networks to facilitate multilateral research similar to that achieved in environmental health.

Background

The African Unions' (AU) vision for African HEIs to become 'a dynamic force in the international arena' under the harmonisation of higher education programmes in Africa, fits in directly with the objectives of the Africa Academy for Environmental Health. The AU seeks to identify innovative forms of collaboration, to facilitate mobilisation of students, graduates and academic staff across Africa, and to ensure that this is an African driven process, among other areas. One of the key areas in the development of the African continent is the establishment of research based policy development. Historically, many policy makers have tended to rely on external experts and institutions to undertake much of this research, and African HEIs have sought partnerships with European and North American institutions rather than those within the continent. This has led to a significant decline in both the quality and quantity of research outputs from African Universities due to lack of belief, time, funding and resources. As such, instead of African led research, many academics undertake consultancies which are often driven by external donors. This also means that, in many cases, research does not address the African context of the work, or more pressing issues which need to be addressed and effectively utilised in policy development.

Challenges in developing research in Environmental Health in Africa

Extensive dialogue and questionnaire based information was undertaken between the AAEH and HEIs offering EH courses. From this the following areas were identified as the significant challenges facing institutions in the development of their research programmes:

- Self belief and competence in terms of proposal writing and collaboration due to a lack of mentoring and the belief that environmental health is second to curative health.
- Poor academic profiling for researchers due to lack of experience and low national priority of environmental health issues.
- Poor track records of publications and research due to a lack of collaboration with external consultants and other stakeholders both nationally and internationally.
- Lack of funding to start research compounded by a lack of resources in terms of human and infrastructural capacity.

Multilateral Research with the AAEH Malaria Prevention

Research in Malawi (Masangwi et al 2011) indicated that although 95% of women (n = 1400) understood the vector of malaria to be the mosquito, only 6.5% understood the mosquitoes need for water to breed. In their primary role of preventive health, Departments of Environmental Health in the Universities currently members of the AAEH network (n = 18 institutions n = 12 countries)(www.ifeh.org/afa). These countries are now undertaking a knowledge, attitude and practice survey before and after the use of an educational video on the breeding habits of mosquitoes. The outcome of this research will be to advise governments and other stakeholders on the essential role of education in conjunction with barrier interventions in the fight against malaria.

AAEH as a model for developing multilateral HEI based research

The AU recognises that the creation and promotion of networking forums can assist in addressing the current challenges facing HEIs in Africa. The AAEH is a network of higher education institutions who offer courses in environmental health. Currently the Academy is comprised of 21 member institutions in 13 countries across the continent. The Academy seeks to improve training and research in EH to be specific and appropriate for Africa while offering academics, students and graduates mobility and portability within their field. In addition, the Academy offers a base for the development of multilateral research programmes on a South-South basis. This allows data for the same research area to be collated across the continent offering a powerful basis for policy development and integration with research findings. The belief that North-South research links were the only options for development previously have been dispelled by the activities of the Academy over the last three years where a number of successful research activities have been undertaken.

AAEH addressing research challenges

Through funding from the Association of African Universities (AAU) Mobilising Regional Capacity Initiative (MRCI) grant, the AAEH was able to identify and address the challenges faced by HEIs in establishing effective research in Environmental Health (EH). The following methods were adopted:

- Development and implementation of regional workshops to build capacity in academics for the preparation and submission of research proposals. The workshops held focussed on female academics and had a number of benefits including, capacity building, networking with other institutions within the region, development of collaborative research concepts. Materials and expertise for facilitating these workshops are now available for implementation on a national or regional basis to HEIs through the AAEH.
- Development of an EH academic database for Africa. This database is an open source available online through the AAEH website which holds profiles of academics from all participating institutions. The availability of this information allows collaborators and organisations to identify appropriate persons with whom they can work from across Africa and increases the profile of EH.
- The AAEH website is to be used as repository for not only academic profiles but also EH related research conducted in Africa to increase access to previous and current work which may be used to inform policy and future research.
- Throughout HEIs in Africa funding and research present a challenge. However through the AAEH, researchers have access to partnerships with other African HEIs which may house the skills and equipment needed to fulfil their research work. This can lead to effective South-South collaborations and to reduced research costs compared to the involvement of north based HEIs.
- Undertaken research (see Box 1) in a number of areas of EH which have been able to span several countries thereby lending weight to the findings and their need to inform policy and programme development.

Policy recommendations

HEIs and funding bodies should actively encourage the support and set up of pan African based networks within their faculties and departments. Such networks have been shown to have a number of advantages for HEIs involved:

- HEIs increase their profile and can easily identify and establish suitable partnerships.
- Research across multiple partners, lends weight to research findings and they are more likely to be incorporated into policy and programme development on a large scale.
- Inclusion of multiple partners provides the necessary resources to facilitate research across the different institutions.
- Research findings have a pan African context which can provide local solutions for local problems thereby steering away from donor driven policy development and consultancies.
- Networks and multilateral partnerships have additional benefits to research alone and can allow exchange of staff and students for teaching and examination purposes to share expertise and experience.

References and Further Reading

- Masangwi S.J., Grimason A.M., Morse T.D., Ferguson N.S., Kazembe L.N. (2011). Community knowledge variation, bed-net coverage, the role of a district health care system and their implications for malaria control in Chikhwawa, southern Malawi. (submitted).
- African Union (2007) Harmonisation of Higher Education Programmes in Africa: A strategy for the African Union. 3rd ordinary session of the conference of ministers of education of the African Union 6th – 10th August 2007. AU/EXP/EDUC/(III)

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