

Benchmarking Southern African Universities

DRAFT Summary

1. Background to project and benchmarking process

As part of the wider RIMI4AC project, The ACU, facilitated a benchmarking event in June 2011. The event, which was co-organised by the University of Botswana and Stellenbosch University, brought together 14 universities in Southern Africa – for the purpose of benchmarking provision for Research Management in their respective institutions. The event took place alongside the 2011 SARIMA annual conference, in Durban, South Africa.

The aim of the benchmarking activity was not to rank the universities', but rather, to provide a forum for discussion and comparison of best practice in Research Management. The benchmarking process was organised around three topics in Research Management and took place in two parts. The first part was a survey which asked the universities to provide information in a three specific areas of Research Management. The second part was a meeting of the participants during which the participants were asked to discuss their provision in the three specified topic areas.

It is hoped that this process will assist the participants (participant universities) in setting up/developing their strategies and processes for Research management

The list of participant universities is as follows

University	Country	Survey Completed	Attendance at the Benchmarking discussion
University of Lesotho	LESOTHO	Yes	Did not attend
University of Antananarivo,	MADAGASCAR-	Yes	Did not attend
University of Malawi,	MALAWI	Yes	Did not attend
University of Mauritius,	MAURITIUS-	Yes	Did not attend
Eduardo Mondlane University	MOZAMBIQUE-	Yes	Did not attend
University of Namibia,	NAMIBIA	Yes	Did not attend
Nelson Mandela Metropolitan University,	SOUTH AFRICA-	Yes	Did not attend
Tshwane University of Technology,	SOUTH AFRICA	Yes	Attended
University of Western Cape	SOUTH AFRICA	Yes	Did not attend
University of Swaziland	SWAZILAND	Yes	Attended
University of Zambia,	ZAMBIA	Yes	Attended
Chinhoyi University of Technology	ZIMBABWE	Yes	Attended
Midlands State University,	ZIMBABWE	Yes	Attended
National University of Science and Technology,	ZIMBABWE	Yes	Attended

2. The Survey

The participating universities were asked to complete a survey in advance of the discussion meeting. They were asked to provide information on their universities in the following three areas: (the full list of questions can be found in Appendix 1)

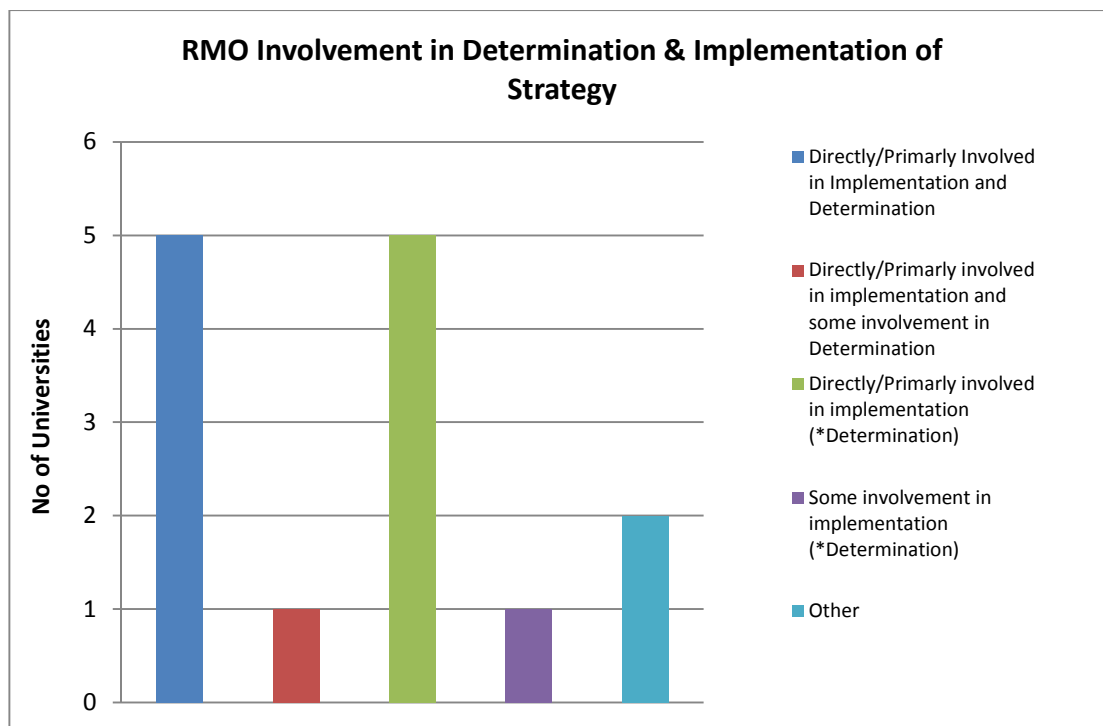
1. Developing a University Research Strategy
2. Supporting external funding applications
3. Project Management and control

The survey qualitative in nature and so we could not make exact comparisons with many of the responses. However, from the responses, we were able to identify a few areas of common practice

Regarding the Development and Implementation of University Research Strategy - A significant section of the group (40%) stated that their strategy respective strategy term (the time after which it

will be reviewed) was every 5 years. Another 40% of the group stated that there was no defined term (in years) for the strategy; or that it was in the early stages of implementation; or was currently being reviewed. Only one university reported that its strategy was not yet in place. However, over half of the group reported that their strategy was well known and/ or well communicated

Almost all the universities (85%) stated that the RMO or equivalent was directly and /or primarily involved in the implementation of the strategy. Of the others that did not share this response, one university reported that its RMO was still being established and the other stated that the RMO “was the “Custodian of the strategy”. In this latter response, it was not clear if the RMO was involved only in a monitoring and evaluating capacity, or if it was involved in the determination and / or implementation of the strategy.



*** Determination – in these cases it was not clear from the responses to what extent (or if) the RMO was involved in the determination of the Strategy**

Regarding Support for Submission of External Research Proposals - many universities (40 % of the group) reported that they had no policy in this area. Less than a third of the group said they had specific rates for overheads stated in their policies and the rest indicated that while overhead costs were included in proposals as standard practice, there was no set figure for this stated in the policy. Over half of the universities (57%) stated that they use external advice (which could be legal advice) at some stage during the application process. Just over a quarter of the group reported that they did not consult external advice (or they did not know of any cases where this had happened). The other universities in the group stated that they relied on their own in-house legal counsel.

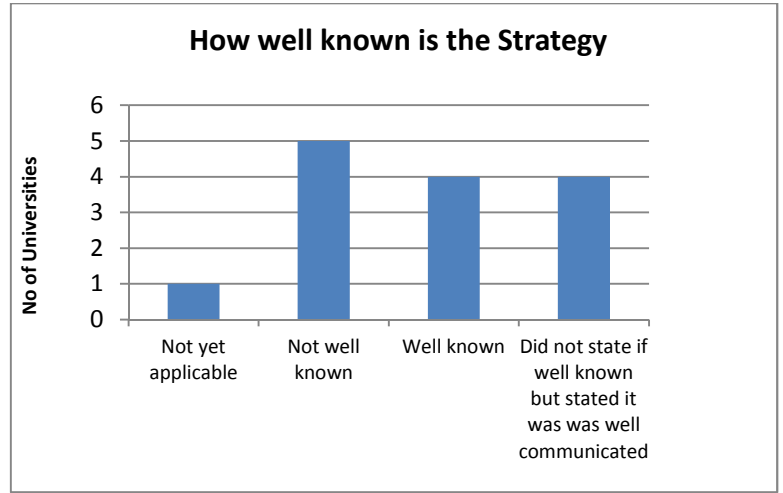
On the question of approval of applications made on behalf of the university – most universities reported that either the DVC, PVC, VC or dean/head of school would be the signatory in this case. About a fifth of the group (21%) stated that the Director of Research (was involved in this process, and was one of the signatory options). The Registrar and the Executive Head were stated as the sole signatory in a few cases - although in most cases, they were one of a range of options.

One respondent reported that responsibility may vary, depending on which level the funding was negotiated. Therefore, it could be signed between the researcher and funding institutions, with testimony of his/her Faculty or Department; or between the Faculty/Department and financing programme; or at University level

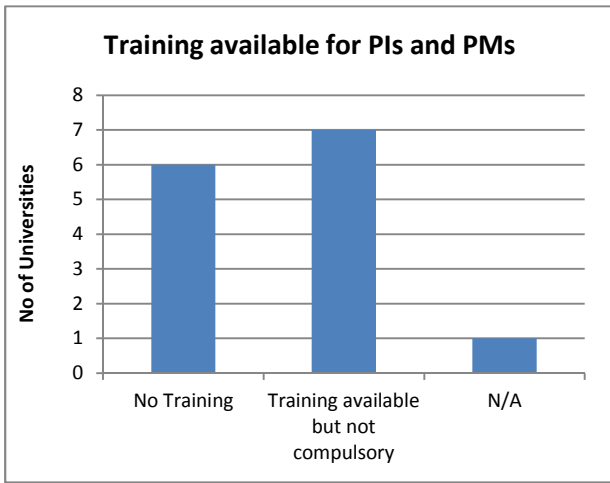
Some Survey Findings



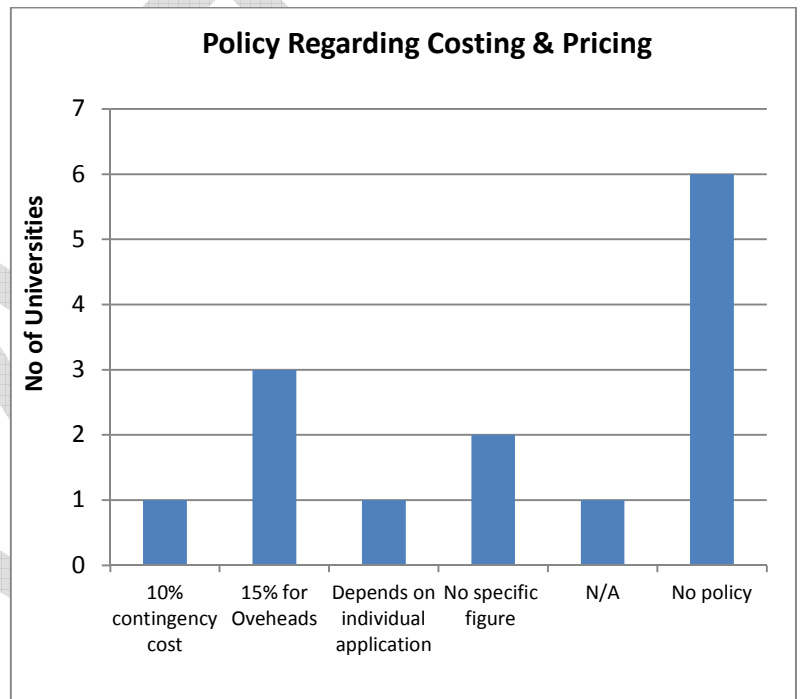
How often is the strategy revised



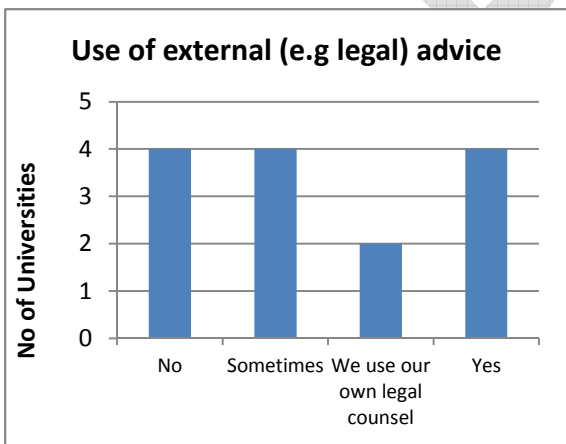
How well known is the strategy



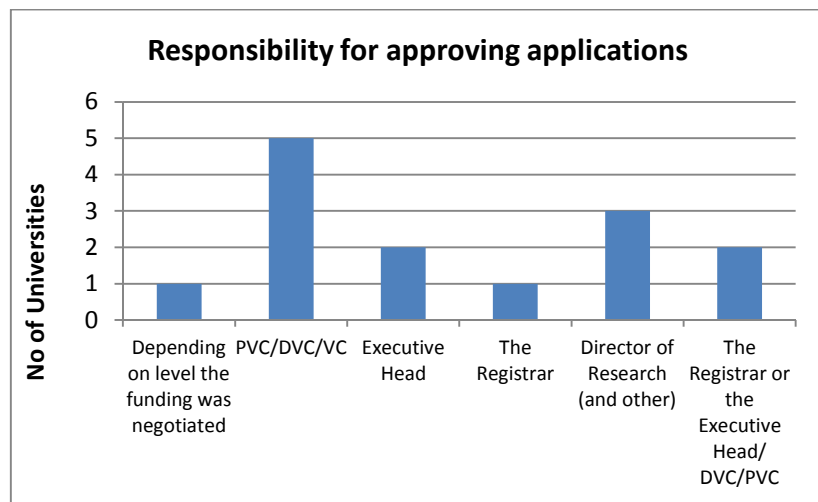
What level of training in PM do PIs or project managers receive? Is this compulsory



What is the policy of the university regarding the costing & pricing of external proposals



Does the university use external advice (e.g legal) at any stage during the process?



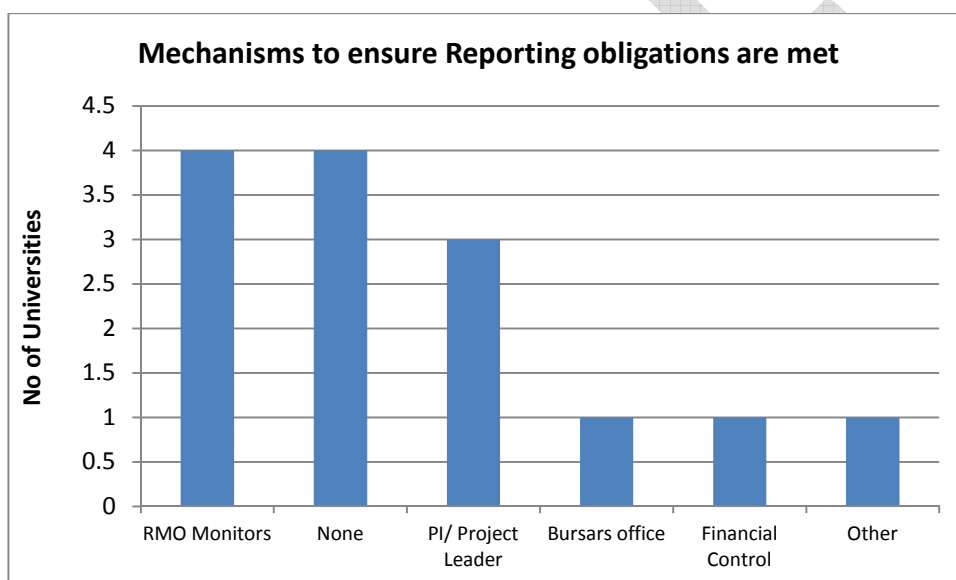
Who has responsibility for approving any applications made on behalf of the university, and signing any contracts that result?

Regarding Project Management and Control – in this section, we asked the universities “what mechanisms exist to ensure that reporting obligations to sponsors are met?” Many universities reported that no mechanisms were currently in place. Out of the group that reported there was no mechanism in place at their university, one stated that there was no mechanism in place, “but the sponsor knows how to deal with it, by freezing the funds in case there is no scientific and financial report”. Another indicated that responsibility lay with the research team.

One respondent (out of the total group) said that their mechanism was to cancel the remaining amount of the project’s budget – which would be under the control of Office of Finance (this is labelled “Financial Control” on the chart below). Another respondent reported that “the Bursar’s office and sponsors, enforce reporting obligations”. It was not clear whether this also meant that a financial penalty would be imposed (as in the previous case) – and so they were illustrated separately

Over a quarter of the group stated that the RMO was responsible for chasing up reports; reminding researchers of project deadlines and checking whether targets/deliverable stated in the respective project proposal have been met.

Three universities reported that the PI/ Research Team was responsible for monitoring and managing their respective projects. However, two of these three respondents stated that their respective RMO does occasionally offer support and advice to ensure that obligations to sponsors are met.



Half of the total group reported that training for PIs and /or PMs was available but not compulsory in their universities. The other half reported that no training was available in this area.

3. Summary of the discussion from the meeting of participants

In preparation for the meeting of the participants, individuals were asked to lead the discussion in particular areas. The ‘session leaders’ were chosen on the basis of the responses they provided in the survey. That is, participants were asked to lead sessions in areas they appeared to have an unusual or distinctive approach). During the meeting, in addition to general comments on their own respective provision, the participants were asked to evaluate their current provision against a series of (ACU) good practice statements.

Developing a University Research Strategy

Most universities said that their respective strategies were up and running. However, it was still at review stage in some universities. The key elements of the strategy at most universities were: Promoting a research culture; Research priority areas; Who gets internal funding; and the term of the strategy (the period of time after which the strategy should be revised).

All the universities agreed that the University research centre, the research board, the senate, faculties and departments should be key individuals/ groups involved in setting up the strategy. A few universities said that they also involved external stakeholders (industries and private companies) when deciding on the priority research areas (most of universities in the group don't currently do this).

Most universities said that they don't have enough information about their own performance, strengths and weaknesses. They currently use annual reports; annual audit of research outputs; Vice-Chancellor's reports; and annual performance systems to get an indication of their performance. However some universities said that they don't even have such reports. All the universities thought that they needed to develop more methods, indicators and matrixes to assess performance.

The universities all said that their respective strategy heavily influences which research area receives internal funding – and that any area outside the priority areas is often, not even considered for internal funding.

The universities all said that they had mechanisms for disseminating the strategy – but they agreed that faculty deans could do more by being jointly responsible (with the research office) for informing their staff of the strategy and what it entails.

Support for Submission of External Research Proposals

Many universities said that generally, their RMO does not know who has received external funding at the university, however, they reported that the Bursar's office tends to have this information. In addition, researchers at their universities tend to consult the RMO only when they experience problems with their proposals – and generally not before. Many universities also said that they had little control over proposals submitted for external funding.

Regarding the costing and pricing of external proposals - The universities reported different positions in some areas such as - what percentage to charge for overheads; whether to charge levies and whether staff are allowed to claim extra salary costs (from externally funded projects). However, they all agreed that: Staff costs; overheads and indirect costs; purchase processes; and incentives for staff were a general tricky area. They also all agreed that Administrators (and support staff) should be informed about projects (and have a general understanding of projects) – This information would prove particularly useful for example, in cases where project equipment needs to be purchased and serviced.

The universities flagged up the lack of appropriately skilled staff in departments, available to review applications before they are submitted – as a problem area

Project Management and Control

Many universities said that the RMO ought to request feedback from the funders to find out whether they were happy with the way the project was carried out. All the universities said that training in project management ought to be compulsory for principal investigators and /or project managers - as it would have a positive impact on the successful management of projects.

Some of the specific comments from the meeting and the suggested areas for revision are outlined below. The original good practice statements are in black text and the comments and areas for revision are highlighted in Pink text

ACU Good Practice Statements on these topics

Developing a University Research Strategy

These questions were put to the group during the meeting. The comments/revisions that emerged are highlighted in pink text

1. The points of the strategy should be short, and to the point
2. The research strategy is framed within the overall goals of the institution. The strategy is distinct from but links clearly with, and is complimentary to, other institutional plans, strategies and policies
3. The research strategy explicitly states its purpose to assist the business of the institution, identifies priorities, and recognises the need to make choice as well as monitor progress
4. The institution's mechanism for determining research strategy is transparent and widely owned
5. The institutional research strategy fully involves faculties in its design and implementation, and policies carried out by individual schools or departments are consistent with it
6. Implementation of the research strategy is overseen by an appropriate member of senior management. The strategy is also backed up by appropriate manpower & resources, to make sure it is implemented
7. The research strategy has the facility to draw on a range of evaluation mechanisms which might include sources external to the university - such as external peer review including other universities
8. The Research Management Office is fully involved in the drafting of institutional research strategies in conjunction with other appropriate offices
9. The research strategy is underpinned by the internal funding mechanisms for research
10. The research strategy is, as far as possible, responsive to the research funding environment and opportunities (at national, international and regional levels)
11. The research strategy seeks to add value to existing activity by proactively highlighting new opportunities for internal and external collaboration. The strategy should also promote interdisciplinary research and the development of early career researchers
12. The research strategy is effectively communicated, monitored, reviewed and developed/refined
13. Methods for evaluation of the strategy and performance indicators should be established from the outset. Key performance indicators should include a balance of quantitative and qualitative methods
14. The research strategy should be sufficiently flexible and defined within a reasonable time frame (e.g. 5 years) reviewed regularly, and be capable of evolving in response to events
15. It is advisable to align the strategy with identified institutional strengths
16. The strategy should take into account the need for appropriate staff incentives

Comments/Points from the meeting

- There ought to be an additional point linking staff development to training and dissemination. (This should also link to the point on incentives)
- There ought to be a point clearly stating that the Strategy should be based on firm evidence of performance and expertise.
- More recognition could be given to the potential of the Strategy as a promotional document for the Institution

Supporting external funding applications

These questions were put to the group during the meeting. The comments/revisions that emerged are highlighted in pink text

1. Institutions have regular, effective and proactive means of informing academics staff on funding opportunities and the strategic directions of funding agencies **where possible, these should involve direct communication between the Research Office and individual staff**
2. Central research Offices have developed and strategically use key contacts in faculties schools, institutes and departments to facilitate a two way flow of information in funding opportunities and research interest
3. The institution maintains a searchable database on institutions research performance, capabilities and contact, including all past projects and proposals
4. Information and current policy from all funders is maintained and communicated as appropriate
5. The Research Office holds regular information **and updating** sessions and targeted workshops for faculty members and graduate students with the purpose of providing information on funding opportunities, proposal development and the development of collaborative research teams to respond to one-off as well as on-going research opportunities
6. The institution seeks to establish an effective two-way communication strategy between themselves and major sponsors and proactively seek to develop that relationship
7. The institution has clear mechanisms in place to handle internal external enquiries regarding possible research and consultancy opportunities and to monitor the outcomes of these on a regular basis
8. The Research Office actively encourages collaboration between different departments within the institution including senior Academic Office, Public Relations, Marketing and Registry
9. The institution seeks to develop mechanisms to effectively track and involve alumni working in key positions with current, past and potential sponsors and in government
10. The research office actively brings key staff together in response to large scale tender and proposals proposal requests where appropriate and where consistent with research strategy
11. Institutions through the Research Office or other appropriate office, ensure that proposals are reviewed by experienced academic and research staff (externally, where appropriate) prior to submission
12. Proposals are only submitted with clear support from Head of Department or other appropriate management authority. **Key personnel who need to be aware of the project should be notified. These may vary according to circumstances**
13. The institution approves all proposals before submission and research offices maintain records on the progress of all proposals
14. The information gained from previously submitted proposals is used to inform future proposals
15. The institution has a clear transparent and widely disseminated formula for determining the full economic cost of any given project, including indirect costs and staff time
16. A full costing is calculated for each externally funded project even if this is not reflected in the price charged
17. All proposed research should be consistent with the institution's overall research strategy
18. The institution provides clear guidance to staff and external sponsors as to which kind of projects and contractual terms are acceptable
19. The institution has a clear authorisation process for accepting external projects which is widely communicated and rigidly enforced
20. The institution has clear risk assessment procedures for proposed projects which recognise the need to involve several key offices within the institution
21. The institution systematically reflects on its progress against its research strategy including regular comparisons with other institutions of similar nature

Comments/Points from the meeting

- **RMOs should clearly distinguish between what is required at application stage, and what can be left until the acceptance stage**
- **Procedures should allow for delegation of responsibilities where it is realistically possible to do so**
- **Attempts should be made to ensure that administrative staff are motivated and feel committed to the research project (one suggestion is that key staff could be involved in research visits, meet opposite numbers with collaborating institutions, etc)**
- **Timescales should be realistic, and take into account wider institutional policies (such as procurement requirements)**

Project Management and Control

These questions were put to the group during the meeting. The comments/revisions that emerged are highlighted in pink text

1. Systems (in the broadest sense) are regularly reviewed to ensure alignment with the institution's strategy, goals and reporting needs.
2. All project proposals contain explicit statements of how the project will be managed and, where possible and appropriate, provision for the appointment of specialist staff.
3. Mechanisms are in place to recognise the critical role of Principal Investigators, to ensure that they and other key actors are aware of their roles and responsibilities before commencement of the project and where required, that appropriate training is undertaken.
4. Key milestones (including reporting and financial review dates) are agreed with key actors at the outset and updated amongst all those actors throughout.
5. IT systems are designed, as far as is possible, to accommodate the business and culture of the institution.
6. Key actors, including Principal Investigators and Deans, are provided with regular and up to date project information (including financial, human resources, IP, and commercialization information), through on-line access or regular statements.
7. Information provided to key actors, including Research Officers and Deans, pro-actively highlights any risks and obligations specific to both them and the institution.
8. Procedures are in place to ensure that all those with access to research are covered by appropriate confidentiality and rights assignment agreements (depending on jurisdiction), particularly those who are covered by a contract of employment with the institution.
9. Mechanisms are in place to ensure that intellectual property both brought to and emerging from research is identified, protected, tracked and signed off at all stages and that staff have access to specialist advice in this regard.
10. Procedures are in place for the appropriate monitoring of material transfer agreements.
11. Mechanisms are in place to identify possible delays and monitor expenditure to ensure it is in line with project budgets.
12. The institutions has an explicit consistent framework within which academic units can predict future revenue and expenditure, especially where such income contributes to underpinning core activities.
13. Mechanisms are in place for the disclosure and management of conflicts of interest.
14. Mechanisms are in place to obtain feedback project sponsors, which can be taken into account in future planning.
15. Formal closure and continuous monitoring processes are in place ensuring that all obligations have been and continue to be met and that opportunities arising from the project are identified.

Comments/Points from the meeting

- **Research Offices should be proactive in classifying key risks and bringing these to the attention of appropriate staff (the suggestion was made- to provide a simple check list, which would be more helpful than simply sending copies of the contract out)**
- **Clear responsibilities need to be allocated for different issues on the check list, and signed off where appropriate**
- **Key milestones need to be established for each project, and the Research Office should contact PI's in advance of these. Such approaches should, however, be presented as constructive – offers to help, requests for copies, etc – rather than threatening or implying that the deadline may have been forgotten.**
- **Feedback from donors could be related to wider relationship building, rather than being systematically collected on a project by project basis.**

Appendices

Appendix 1: Survey Questions

DEVELOPMENT AND IMPLEMENTATION OF UNIVERSITY RESEARCH STRATEGY

- 1.1 To what extent is a university research strategy in place?
- 1.2 What are the key elements of the strategy? To what extent is this time bound?
- 1.3 Who are the key individuals or groups in setting the strategy?
- 1.4 How often is the strategy revised? When was this last undertaken, and what were the major changes at that time?
- 1.5 In setting the strategy, what information does the institution have about its own performance, strengths and weaknesses?
- 1.6 1.6. How is the strategy taken into account in distributing internal research funds?
- 1.7 1.7. Is the strategy used in determining strategy for determining priorities for seeking external funds?
- 1.8 1.8. How well known is the strategy? How is it disseminated internally and externally
- 1.9 1.9. To what extent is the research management office of the university involved in the determination or implementation of such strategy?

SUPPORT FOR SUBMISSION OF EXTERNAL RESEARCH PROPOSALS

- 2.1 In what ways does the university assist staff to identify external funding opportunities and prepare funding proposals?
- 2.2 At what stage does the university require sight of any proposals being submitted by academic staff?
- 2.3 What role (if any) does the university or research office have in improving the academic content or presentation of such proposals?
- 2.4 What is the policy of the university regarding the costing and pricing of external proposals?
- 2.5 Who has responsibility for approving any applications made on behalf of the university, and signing any contracts that result?
- 2.6 At what point would the university consider the possible risks in any external work? Who would be involved in this process?
- 2.7 Does the university use external advice (e.g. legal) at any stage during the process?
- 2.8 How is the effectiveness of the university in winning external funding assessed in relation to its strategy and competitors

SESSION THREE: PROJECT MANAGEMENT AND CONTROL

- 3.1 How does the institution ensure that that the financial and contractual terms under which a project takes place are communicated to internal stakeholders, and that the roles and responsibilities of specific individuals are defined
- 3.2 What mechanisms does the university have to ensure that appropriate confidentiality is maintained?
- 3.3 How would the university identify and record any intellectual property arising out of an externally funded project?
- 3.4 What systems are in place to monitor the progress of the research? Are these confined to the research team only, or is the research management office involved?
- 3.5 What mechanisms exist to ensure that reporting obligations to sponsors are met?
- 3.6 How does the university ensure that project expenditure remains in line with the budget?
- 3.7 How does the university measure the satisfaction of the sponsor /client / funder on completion of the project?
- 3.8 What level of training in project management do principal investigators or project managers receive? Is this compulsory?

Appendix 2: The meeting programme

Time	Topic
08:15 – 08:30	Introduction
	Session One: Development and Implementation of University Research Strategy
08:30 – 09:00	<p>1.1. To what extent is a university research strategy in place? 1.2. What are the key elements of the strategy? To what extent is this time bound? 1.3. Who are the key individuals or groups in setting the strategy? 1.4. How often is the strategy revised? When was this last undertaken, and what were the major changes at that time? 1.9. To what extent is the research management office of the university involved in the determination or implementation of such strategy?</p> <p>Lesotho, Malawi, Mauritius, Nelson Mandela, Swaziland, Chinoyi, Eduardo</p> <p>1.5. In setting the strategy, what information does the institution have about its own performance, strengths and weaknesses? 1.6. How is the strategy taken into account in distributing internal research funds? 1.7. Is the strategy used in determining strategy for determining priorities for seeking external funds? 1.8. How well known is the strategy? How is it disseminated internally and externally?</p> <p>Madagascar, Namibia, Tshwane, Western Cape, Zambia, Midlands</p>
09:30 – 10:00	Discussion
	Session TWO: Support for Submission of External Research Proposals
10:00 – 10:30	<p>2.1. In what ways does the university assist staff to identify external funding opportunities and prepare funding proposals? 2.2. At what stage does the university require sight of any proposals being submitted by academic staff? 2.3. What role (if any) does the university or research office have in improving the academic content or presentation of such proposals/ 2.4. What is the policy of the university regarding the costing and pricing of external proposals?</p> <p>Lesotho, Nelson Mandela, Swaziland, Western Cape, Zambia, Chinoyi, NUST, Eduardo</p> <p>2.5. Who has responsibility for approving any applications made on behalf of the university, and signing any contracts that result? 2.6. At what point would the university consider the possible risks in any external work? Who would be involved in this process? 2.7. Does the university use external advice (e.g legal) at any stage during the process? 2.8. How is the effectiveness of the university in winning external funding assessed in relation to its strategy and Competitors?</p> <p>Madagascar, Malawi, Namibia, Mauritius, Tshwane, Midlands</p>
	Coffee / Tea Break
11:00 – 11:30	Discussion
	Session Three: Project Management and Control
11:30 – 12:00	<p>Presentations 3.1 How does the institution ensure that that the financial and contractual terms under which a project takes place are communicated to internal stakeholders, and that the roles and responsibilities of specific individuals are defined? 3.3 How would the university identify and record any intellectual property arising out of an externally funded project? 3.6 How does the university ensure that project expenditure remains in line with the budget? 3.8 What level of training in project management do principal investigators or project managers receive? Is this compulsory?</p> <p>Madagascar, Mauritius, Namibia, Nelson Mandela, Swaziland, Zambia, Eduardo</p> <p>3.2 What mechanisms does the university have to ensure that appropriate confidentiality is maintained? 3.4 What systems are in place to monitor the progress of the research? Are these confined to the research team only, or is the research management office involved? 3.5 What mechanisms exist to ensure that reporting obligations to sponsors are met? 3.7 How does the university measure the satisfaction of the sponsor /client / funder on completion of the project?</p> <p>Lesotho, Malawi, Tshwane, Western Cape, Chinoyi, Midlands, NUST</p>
12:00 – 12:30	Discussion