

DRUSSA HE Symposium – Mauritius

Ministry of Education Policy Symposium – Friday 27 November 2015 – *Mauritius Higher Education Institutions and Research Uptake: Research Responses to Development Priorities*

Introduction

The symposium brought together a unique mix of higher education players that accurately reflected the changing face of higher education in Mauritius. Thirty key higher education players, including the Tertiary Education Commission, Vice Chancellors, academics and industry stakeholders involved in shaping higher education policy and direction in Mauritius. The symposium specifically discussed ways in which research can help to inform and enhance responses to development priorities and best examples as showcased by the University of Mauritius.

Context

Since independence in 1968, Mauritius has seen steady economic growth, moving from a lower income country during the 1960s to a middle income country by the mid-2000s. As the country has progressed economically, so has the higher education sector. Enrolment and quality of education have improved steadily since the 1970s, with enrolment rates in tertiary education jumping from 15.1% in 2000 up to 50.1% in 2013¹, after lingering below 1% in the decades following independence and creeping steadily upwards since 1985². Due in part to improvements in the quality of primary and secondary education, growth in the number of tertiary education institutions in the country has encouraged higher enrolment rates.

The tertiary education sector has responded to the development needs of the country by designing curricula and establishing institutions that speak not only to national economic growth priorities but also to wider national and local development needs. As part of the report *'Towards a Common Future' Higher Education and SADC Regional Development*³, Mauritius' higher education goals highlight several of these, including:

- Encouraging research, particularly in science and technology, for national development;
- Transforming Mauritius into a knowledge hub; and
- Strengthening sector capability and optimising use of resources in the context of a small island state.

¹ Mohamudally-Booaky, A. and Padachi, K. (2015). "Mauritius as a Regional Hub for Higher Education in Africa: Opportunities and Challenges", *Journal of Emerging Trends in Economics and Management Sciences (JETEMS)*, 6(3): 214-220.

² Bloom, D., Canning, D., and Chan, K. (2006). *Higher Education and Economic Development in Africa – Higher Education in Mauritius and Tanzania: A Comparison*. The Africa Region Working Paper Series, World Bank.

³ Kotecha, P. (Ed.) (2009). "Towards a Common Future: Higher Education in the SADC Region: Regional Country Profile Mauritius", *Towards a Common Future' Higher Education and SADC Regional Development (Study Series 2008)*: SARUNA.

The higher education sector in Mauritius is well placed to respond to these specific goals, and already does, particularly through good practices in research uptake. However, the process is not without its difficulties. With this in mind, this Symposium brought together key stakeholders in higher education in Mauritius to focus on the challenges of bringing research into a wider policy dialogue. The symposium focused on available examples and best practices of good research uptake practice already taking place in Mauritius, focussing on higher education policy and mechanisms that stimulate both the supply of and demand for development focused research and the wider adoption of research uptake practices within the higher education sector.

Keynote Speakers

Vice Chancellor of the University of Mauritius, Professor Romela Mohee, and Pro Chancellor and Chairman of the University of Mauritius Council, Mr. P. Chitamun

The programme featured a range of stakeholders from across Mauritius with vested interests in higher education. Vice Chancellor of the University of Mauritius, Professor Romela Mohee, and Pro Chancellor and Chairman of the University of Mauritius Council, Mr. P. Chitamun, opened proceedings with commitments to and highlights of the importance of research uptake. They each provided insightful reflections on the importance of research uptake and the utility of university research to inform wider public policy.

The Vice Chancellor addressed the changing landscape and approach to funding by donors, noting that research uptake is an increasingly important criterion for funding with the view that research is a global public good. She stressed that the University of Mauritius is increasingly emphasising research uptake as part of the research process carried out by academics. However, she noted that too often, research carried out by academia in Mauritius is not known to policy makers, the media, general public, students, etc. as academics normally publish in peer reviewed journals only. With this in mind, she highlighted examples of research that has influenced policy in Mauritius, such as her own work on solid waste management, where her team has worked with NGOs to train people to compost waste for their own use and for sale. The Vice Chancellor also underlined the University of Mauritius' Strategic Plan for 2015-2020, which includes six strategic directions, among which are Excellence in Research & Innovation and Sustainable Community Engagement, both vital areas for research uptake. The policies for these six strategic directions are currently being developed for approval by the University of Mauritius Council.

The Vice Chancellor noted the future opening of the University of Mauritius' Knowledge Transfer Office (KTO), which will promote stronger links between the University and its stakeholders, and also act as a 'one-stop shop' for Intellectual Property Rights (IPR) and patenting. The KTO opening is one of the University's key commitments to furthering research uptake across the wider Mauritius policy landscape.

Mr Chitamun set the stage for the worldwide landscape of research uptake in the higher education system and the importance of generated knowledge, especially that produced by the University of Mauritius, reaching end users in an easily digestible format. He called on delegates to 'not only adapt or perish but also innovate or perish', highlighting the role that research uptake has in responding to development needs and the duty of researchers to carry out investigations that are 'open, participative, contextualised, and needs-based'. He questioned how much research

conducted by academics in Mauritius is responding to problems currently facing the Mauritius context.

Key points

- The research landscape is changing and funders are asking for demonstrations of impact.
- There is a missing link between research institutions and relevant policymaking bodies.
- There are key examples of best practice coming out of the University of Mauritius in research uptake but more work needs to be done.
- Initiatives such as the Knowledge Transfer Office serve as way for higher education institutions to develop mechanism for research uptake.
- Joint cooperation and research between public and private institutions in Mauritius is key for development.

Mr A Valaydon, Mauritius Tertiary Education Commission, the Ministry of Education, Human Resources, Tertiary Education and Scientific Research (MoEHRTESR)

Mr A Valaydon from the Mauritius Tertiary Education Commission, the Ministry of Education, Human Resources, Tertiary Education and Scientific Research (MoEHRTESR), was invited to make a keynote speech on the the Higher Education Landscape in Mauritius. Mr Valaydon outlined many of the issues facing higher education in Mauritius and how they relate to research uptake, along with the Commission's strategic objectives for tertiary education, including widening access, quality and relevance, good governance, internationalisation, and promoting research. The last item is particularly relevant to research uptake, as the number of PhDs awarded per year in Mauritius is very low and the Commission is aware that incentives are needed for more PhDs to be undertaken.

Discussion with Mr Valaydon was wide ranging and provided insights into the concerns of the stakeholders present and the Commission's role in the wider higher education context in Mauritius. Questions and comments concentrated on the following topics:

- Incentives for PhD study within Mauritius to increase research outputs and to respond to the governments mandate to create a knowledge hub on the island
- The role of the Tertiary Education Commission in supporting research uptake
- Best practices in showcasing research produced by the University of Mauritius and other tertiary institutions

Key points

- The TEC is cognizant of the need to incentivise research and steps they are taking to ensure this is reinstating full funding for PhDs and increasing the number of funded places
- While the TEC cannot endorse targeted scholarships for particular areas of study, they have released a list of priority areas in research
- The TEC cannot impose a research uptake mechanism on universities in Mauritius; however he did entertain the idea of instituting a mechanism for promoting research

Recommendations

- Targeted PhD scholarships to link the supply and demand side of the economy
- Providing resources for best practices in research uptake to institutions across the island
- Institutions should develop a research uptake mechanism at their own institutions

- TEC can serve as a resource for research uptake in Mauritius and while an official research uptake mechanism may not be possible, providing best practices in research uptake could be a viable alternative
- Initiatives such as research weeks and seminars held at institutions across the country, along with conferences and forums to share research findings should be jointly supported by the Tertiary Education Commission and Mauritius HEIs to provide local researchers the opportunity to communicate their findings to relevant stakeholders.

Prof B. Lalljee, Faculty of Agriculture, University of Mauritius and DRUSSA Leader

Professor B. Lalljee of the University of Mauritius and DRUSSA programme Leader for the University, spoke on Research Uptake in Modern Society, outlining best practices in research uptake management, the research cycle, producing research evidence and the importance of monitoring and evaluation of research uptake. As case studies in research uptake, Prof Lalljee looked at the University of Mauritius project on sustainable agricultural technologies for climate change adaptation in Mauritius and Rodrigues, funded by the European Union and the IAEA

Discussion on research uptake focused on the value and importance of understanding where and how research uptake fits into the cycle. Professor Lalljee drew on his expertise as part of the DRUSSA working group for best practices in research uptake and utilising examples of University of Mauritius best practices for research uptake. This was valuable for those in the room to have tangible examples of research uptake practices in place.

Key discussion points

- Training in research uptake is key to its success and universities can play a role in training academics. The University of Mauritius has taken a role in this and are in the process of developing a schedule for conducting training for academics. This is voluntary for those already in post but mandatory for new recruits to the University.
- Institutional support is vital in terms of visibility of support shown to research uptake initiatives across a university; thus shoring up buy-in from management is key.
- Looking beyond traditional methods for academic promotion is key to engaging with research uptake. In particular, focusing on finding ways to engage with research impacts beyond journal publications is fundamental to engaging with research stakeholders. At the University of Mauritius, the set of promotion criteria incorporates factors for research uptake beyond traditional publishing methods.

Recommendations

- Universities considering incorporating research uptake into institutional policies should allow for research dedicated to the community to be recognized, along with other nontraditional methods for promotion.
- Drawing on Mauritius' framework for offering joint degrees between a local and international institution, there is room for the University of Mauritius to think about creating a joint MPhil/PhD programme in research uptake in collaboration with CREST at the University of Stellenbosch, a DRUSSA partner institution, thus contributing to the goal for the creation of Mauritius as a knowledge hub.

Research uptake practices in Mauritius higher education

Drawing on the diverse attendance of Mauritius higher education institutions, the afternoon session focused on highlighting best practices from an array of Mauritius higher education institutions (see programme). To draw on these best practices, examples from a variety of different areas were called upon, including

- The interface between science research and policymaking;
- The role of HEIs in the development of small and medium enterprises (SMEs);
- Perspectives from the end-users of research uptake;
- Research uptake and the changing role of the university in society;
- Impacts on policy and society in the environment; and
- Demand driven research projects in the Social Sciences

Key discussion points

Recommendations

Outcomes

Strengths

- Quality presentations and discussion;
- Good representation from Ministry and HE policymaking stakeholders;
- Excellent opening remarks from University of Mauritius
- Robust and informed responses to presentations and lively discussion between participants;
- Enthusiasm from stakeholders and participants for follow-up activities;
- Afternoon chair Prof Pamela Mbabazi session kept conversation on track and focused;
- Afternoon paper presentation by Dr Kedrace Turyagyenda of the Ministry of Education was an essential contribution to the proceedings and ensuing discussion;
- Good gender representation in presenters/chair;
- Attendance was high and diverse stakeholders were represented.

Weaknesses

- Morning session relied heavily on protocol and ran overtime;
- Morning paper presentation focused heavily on primary education rather than HE;
- Gender of participants was heavily male;
- Number of returned evaluations were not representative of number of attendees;
- There was some confusion and dissent from participations about the last session, 'The Way Forward' by Kevin Balaba, the Assistant Commissioner for Budgeting on behalf of Arnold Dhatemwa, the Commissioner for Education Planning and Policy Analysis in MESTS. It was not evident to the participants that the Ministry had received a prior copy of Dr

Turyagyenda's paper ahead of time and had chosen recommendations to take forward as a result. Many participants were under the impression that they would be discussing and voting on the key recommendations to take forward, rather than the Ministry deciding this;

- Morning session papers were both from Makerere University.

Opportunities

- Capitalise on the set of recommendations coming out of the symposium by arranging further meetings with Ministry of Education officials, particularly as there appears to be some level of buy-in from the Ministry of Education and a valuable supporter in Dr Turyagyenda;
- Discuss potential synergies with Ghana Higher Education Symposium activities;
- Lessons learned from this symposium should be captured and used to inform future higher education symposia (this includes information from the pre- and post-questionnaires);
- Potential for WP2 and WP5 collaboration in Uganda, especially to carry forward the recommendations made as a result of the symposium. These could be carried forward through policy fellows, short courses, or other parts of the programme;
- There is no shortage of topics for additional education symposia in Uganda that could act as a continuation on themes from this symposium;
- Dr Kedrace Turyagyenda is a useful ally for the DRUSSA programme and will be speaking at the ACU SARIMA conference in Johannesburg on 12 May on building partnerships for research uptake and knowledge transfer. This could be a useful opportunity for her to speak about taking some of the recommendations forward.
- While 100% return on evaluations is difficult, to ensure that as many participants as possible complete evaluation forms for future symposia, the pre-questionnaire could be included in the participant pack and five minutes taken at the beginning of the morning session for all participants to complete the evaluation and then collected by staff. A similar format could be followed just before the closing session for handing out and completing the post-questionnaires.

Threats:

- Continued poor quality and lack of access to higher education research for both academics and policy makers.
- Carrying the momentum forward despite competing activities to follow through with recommendations.

Recommendations