



The Association  
of Commonwealth  
Universities



# GENERATING TALENT:

**TRANSFORMING SUPPORT FOR THE  
RESEARCH LANDSCAPE IN SOUTH AFRICA**

REPORT ON A SYMPOSIUM

# ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

This report was written by Professor Amon Taruvunga and Ben Prasadam-Halls on behalf of the Association of Commonwealth Universities (ACU) and Universities South Africa (USAf).

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As referenced in the introduction, the structure of the symposium's programme was influenced heavily by a report produced by Professor Johann Mouton and his colleagues at the Centre for Research on Evaluation, Science and Technology (CREST) at Stellenbosch University, and we would like to acknowledge the valuable intellectual underpinnings of the symposium which were derived from their report. We are also thankful to Professor Ahmed Bawa at USAf for his recommendations on the programme and for his feedback and comments on this report.

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# FOREWORD

'The modernisation of South Africa's economy will be driven by universities.' So spoke the Hon Dr Naledi Pandor, the then Minister of Higher Education and Training, at a symposium convened by the Association of Commonwealth Universities (ACU) and Universities South Africa (USAf) earlier this year – underlining the critical role that higher education plays in national development, in the deepening of South Africa's democracy and in the building of a more competitive, more inclusive economy.

Universities strengthen education policy and practice at all levels, underpinning a sustainable education system from cradle to grave. Through research, universities play a unique role in producing new knowledge and innovation to address local, national and global challenges, and providing evidence for informed public policy. Universities are an essential partner in the triple helix model of innovation, working with governments and industry.

In order to fulfil their role, universities must build on the foundations of their existing research capacity and develop a new generation of academics. Early career academics are the researchers, teachers, and leaders of the future – the lifeblood of our universities.

Increasing both the number and the quality of PhD graduates is crucial not only for future development, but also for equity and diversity. While the university sector is well on the way to fulfilling the targets of South Africa's National Development Plan, there are still gaps. The current system's limited capacity to supervise a greatly increased number of postgraduates is a challenge.

There are a huge number of effective and inspiring activities taking place across South Africa already: initiatives funded by government, through the Department of Higher Education and Training (DHET) and the Department of Science and Technology (DST); programmes launched by universities; and projects led in partnership with colleagues across the continent and beyond.

So we were delighted to bring university and research leaders together for that symposium to look collectively at how to transform support for the research landscape. This report captures the reflections of the South African higher education sector on how best to support early career researchers, and proposes a series of recommendations – for universities, the government, and other stakeholders – on how to address the challenges. We look forward to seeing these taken forward, through partnership between South African universities, the ACU, and our colleagues from across the Commonwealth.

## **Dr Joanna Newman**

Chief Executive Officer and Secretary General, The Association of Commonwealth Universities

## **Professor Ahmed Bawa**

Chief Executive Officer, Universities South Africa

**Increasing both the number and the quality of PhD graduates is crucial not only for future development, but also for equity and diversity.**

# SUMMARY OF RECOMMENDATIONS

Early career academics are crucial to the long-term vitality of teaching and research, and to the future of universities. They are the next generation of teaching staff, of cutting-edge innovation and research leadership, and are a valuable resource to be nurtured and developed.

There is a pressing challenge for universities to create an environment that enables their staff to thrive. Soaring enrolment has placed unprecedented pressures on many institutions, leaving emerging academics struggling with heavy teaching and administrative workloads. When resources are strained, ensuring that a faculty can continue to develop and grow often presents a major challenge.

This report outlines the main discussion points and the key recommendations arising from a symposium convened jointly by the Association of Commonwealth Universities (ACU) and Universities South Africa (USAf) in March 2019. Leaders from across the South African higher education sector reflected on a host of current initiatives, recent research and their own experience, to make the following set of recommendations:

## The untapped potential of postdocs

- 1.1 A **review of the postdoctoral system in South Africa** should be undertaken. This should: include reflections from other countries; assess the benefit or otherwise of reclassifying postdocs as staff; chart where postdocs are currently being recruited from; quantify both the optimal numbers and the level of additional funding required to create those new positions.
- 1.2 Subject to the review, the sector should consider an **international postdoc recruitment campaign** that highlights the comparative advantages within the South African system.

## Increasing high quality PhD production

- 2.1 The ACU should **advocate for more split-site PhDs** among international scholarship funders.
- 2.2 The option to **incorporate 12 months abroad should be provided within all PhD programmes**, with an emphasis on Commonwealth countries with strong PhD programmes and broadly compatible HE systems.
- 2.3 **Efforts should be focused on enhancing PhD throughput and graduation rates** ahead of increasing the number of PhD programmes.

- 2.4 The DHET should commission a **horizon scanning of international initiatives to improve PhD throughput**, using the issues highlighted by the CREST study as a framework to identify examples that may be informative for developing South African responses.

- 2.5 **The pilot centres for doctoral training should be evaluated for their influence on throughput**, looking at both retention and time to completion.

- 2.6 The DHET and the NRF should consider how to **introduce more consortium-based models of doctoral training**.

## Supervision capacity

- 3.1 The ACU and USAf should explore the development of a **partnership to strengthen supervision capacity**.

- 3.2 They should collaboratively **design and trial criteria for good supervision**, potentially in partnership with other Commonwealth countries, in order to facilitate comparative analysis and peer learning.

- 3.3 **South African HEIs should seek funding and mechanisms to scale up supervision skills training** across all universities. This could include the expansion of existing training to academics from a wider range of institutions, and/or training research support staff to replicate that training within their own institutions.

- 3.4 The **ACU should explore a scheme to attract visiting faculty** from across the Commonwealth, with doctoral supervision a key element of their remit. This should include a critical examination of past attempts to mobilise international faculty in this way, recognising that this approach has not always met with success.

- 3.5 **Split-site PhD programmes should be used as a way to mentor and support emerging researchers** in developing their supervision skills.

- 3.6 **Supervision practice should be built into PhD training** within collaborative doctoral training schools.

## Academic mentoring schemes

- 4.1 There should be an **exploration of the effectiveness of the wide variety of approaches to academic mentoring** across the Commonwealth, to enable the sharing of good practice recommendations that reflect differences in context, culture and resourcing.

## Research support capacity

- 5.1 **Investment in early career support needs to go hand-in-hand with investment in the capacity of research support offices and their staff** to ensure that any new schemes are delivered effectively and sustainably.
- 5.2 The **ACU, USAf and SARIMA should convene a vice-chancellor level discussion on how to expand research support provision**, with a focus on structures, resourcing, and measures of performance.

## Teaching and research nexus

- 6.1 Better **coordination of activities and pooling of resources between researcher development and teaching and learning support** is needed, in order to deliver efficiencies in operation.
- 6.2 The leaderships of **SARIMA and HELTASA should discuss opportunities for collaboration**, including the potential to organise annual conferences in tandem or to co-host a symposium for deputy vice-chancellors.
- 6.3 The DHET should continue to leverage the **UCDG to promote more holistic approaches to academic development**.

## Involving HR directors

- 7.1 **HR directors should routinely be consulted in these conversations**.
- 7.2 Connections should be established between the **USAf HR Directors' Forum and the ACU HR in HE community** of practice.
- 7.3 The **ACU should explore bringing a conference of its HR in HE community to South Africa**, enabling South African HR professionals to compare their experiences with those of their peers from across the Commonwealth.

## Collaboration for increased efficiency

- 8.1 **USAf should map existing training support and capacity gaps across the HE sector in South Africa** (and other African countries) with a view to a coordinated sharing of resources between institutions.
- 8.2 The **ACU should explore options to re-run the STARS training programme** working with South African partners, to refresh, update and expand the scope of the content.
- 8.3 The **DHET or USAf should establish a VC-led efficiency task force** to identify where sector-wide collaboration can reduce duplication and fragmentation, and to suggest how efficiencies can be achieved.

## Building a research culture through pedagogical reform

- 9.1 The NRF should invite **empirical study of the suggested link between teaching practice and research culture**.
- 9.2 Programmes of pedagogical reform should seek to help both **students and staff to acquire the skills and confidence to think critically, and question and challenge one another**.
- 9.3 The **ACU should explore expanding its PEBL project** to southern Africa and other parts of the continent.
- 9.4 Universities should consider options to **encourage undergraduate students to participate in research**.

# BACKGROUND

In March 2019, the Association of Commonwealth Universities (ACU) and Universities South Africa (USAf) jointly convened a symposium, hosted by the University of Johannesburg, to discuss a range of important issues germane to developing the next generation of early career researchers. Senior representatives from 24 of the 26 South African universities, along with public and sector bodies, gathered for two days of information sharing and dialogue.

The symposium took its cue from a 2018 CREST study commissioned by the DST, entitled *'Building a cadre of emerging scholars for HE in South Africa.'*<sup>1</sup> In particular, the symposium was in many respects a response to recommendation 7 of that report, to *'ensure that good practice about effective interventions is shared'*. A broad range of presentations detailed the current situation in South Africa, and shared insights from some innovative programmes and interventions operating both in South Africa and beyond. In a series of round table discussions themed around the findings and recommendations of the CREST report, participants reflected upon these issues, identifying and debating possible recommendations for addressing the challenges facing the sector as it seeks to develop the capacity of early career researchers.

This report gives a summary of the main discussion points and recommendations arising from the symposium. The recommendations presented here do not necessarily reflect the official position of either the ACU or USAf, but are a reflection of the aggregated views of the individuals who took part in the symposium: views informed and shaped by the research and initiatives shared within the presentations, and by a wealth of collective experience and viewpoints representing the full breadth of sector bodies and universities in South Africa.

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1 Mouton et al., 'Building a cadre of emerging scholars for HE in South Africa' (2018) <[www.dst.gov.za/images/2018/Emerging-Scholars\\_22.pdf](http://www.dst.gov.za/images/2018/Emerging-Scholars_22.pdf)>

# 1. THE UNTAPPED POTENTIAL OF POSTDOCS

Time and again, the discussion turned to the potential for postdocs to bolster the system and help to unlock many of its constraints by carrying a greater teaching load, supervising postgraduate students, assisting in research projects, supporting outreach and community engagement and by mentoring their peers. However, there was a consensus that there are currently far too few funded postdoctoral opportunities in South Africa for such a contribution to be realised. Even among the few universities that have managed to significantly increase their postdocs, the numbers remain far below those found in peer institutions in other countries.

Participants suggested that there is also a low domestic demand for postdoctoral study among South African early career researchers. This was attributed to PhD production in South Africa continuing to be at a level below the country's aspirations, and that many of the doctoral graduates who choose to pursue academic careers are either already employed within the sector or are able to secure permanent, salaried academic posts relatively easily. Consequently, a fixed-term, postdoctoral position – with the status of a student and no guarantee of a faculty position at the end of it – was not thought to be sufficiently attractive. This is despite competitive bursaries that are comparable to the salary of a senior lecturer. It was suggested that South Africa may, therefore, need to look outside the country in order to recruit postdocs – and perhaps to countries like the UK, which have an excess supply of doctoral graduates. However, universities reported very limited success in recruiting postdocs internationally, speculating that the salary, terms of service and associated student status may be discouraging.

When compared using market exchange rates, South African postdocs earn approximately 70% as much as their UK counterparts. However, when purchasing power parity rates are used to adjust for differences in the cost of living, South Africa is able to make a very attractive financial offer. The tax-free postdoctoral stipends in South Africa are close to 150% of the equivalent UK salaries (after tax) when using purchasing power parities (PPPs)<sup>2</sup>. This suggests that, if the positions are marketed in the right way, there is considerable potential for South Africa to be very successful in recruiting postdocs internationally.

Aside from the limited numbers of postdocs in the system, many participants pointed to their employment status – making them more akin to students than university staff – as placing considerable constraints on their potential to ease the pressures on academic staff. An implication of this status, participants pointed out, was that postdocs are only permitted to undertake 12 hours of work per week. This, it was argued, is insufficient to make the needed contribution to teaching, mentoring, supervision and other academic activities outside of their research. It also limits the breadth of experience that the postdocs themselves can gain – something that, in other contexts, is an important objective at this level.

Several of the points raised above were contested during the symposium, including, for example, the extent to which postdocs are necessarily constrained from contributing to broader academic life by the tax rules. It was countered that these constraints can be avoided by writing teaching and supervision duties into their contracts. Irrespective of which position is correct, this disagreement suggests that, at the very minimum, there is ambiguity and potential confusion over how the current system can be made to work, as well as a lack of clarity regarding the genuine constraints and potential enhancements that could be made by reforming that system.

## Recommendations:

- 1.1 A **review of the postdoctoral system in South Africa** should be undertaken. This should: include reflections from other countries; assess the benefit or otherwise of reclassifying postdocs as staff; chart where postdocs are currently being recruited from; quantify both the optimal numbers and the level of additional funding required to create those new positions.
- 1.2 Subject to the review, the sector should consider an **international postdoc recruitment campaign** that highlights the comparative advantages within the South African system.

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<sup>2</sup> Purchasing power parities (PPPs) are the rates of currency conversion that try to equalise the purchasing power of different currencies, by eliminating the differences in price levels between countries. <[data.oecd.org/conversion/purchasing-power-parities-ppp.htm](http://data.oecd.org/conversion/purchasing-power-parities-ppp.htm)>

## 2. INCREASING HIGH QUALITY PHD PRODUCTION

Several of the presentations regarding the current situation in South Africa highlighted the mismatch between the current PhD production in the country and national aspirations. The National Development Plan (NDP)<sup>3</sup> sets a target of 100 doctoral graduates per one million of the population per year by 2030, which translates to approximately 5,000 PhD graduates per annum. Statistics released by the Department of Higher Education and Training (DHET)<sup>4</sup> show that good progress is being made toward this target, with the number of PhD graduates doubling from 1,420 in 2010 to 2,797 in 2016. However, there remains a long way to go and doubts were raised among participants about the capability of the system to continue this trajectory of growth, while maintaining quality. Further comments highlighted concerns that South Africa is not producing sufficient PhDs in key areas such as the mathematical sciences. This, it was felt, had serious implications for the long-term sustainability of the academic enterprise.

As Minister Pandor noted in her keynote address, increasing the number of PhD graduates is crucial not only for future development, but also for equity and diversity. The CREST study found that among lecturers and senior lecturers, who constitute 72% of all instructional staff, 44% of senior lecturers and 82% of lecturers do not have a PhD<sup>5</sup>. Using a relatively weak measure of publication activity (at least one article unit in two years) just 42% of senior lecturers and 25% of lecturers were categorised as actively publishing. There is a clear need to upgrade the qualifications of existing staff, with the same research indicating that the NDP target for 75% of academics being in possession of a doctorate by 2030 will not be achieved. The DHET's plan to establish more than 2,000 new academic posts within the next five years through the New Generation of Academics Programme (nGAP) further illustrates the scale of the challenge.

Some of the participants noted that South Africa has a comparatively weaker PhD throughput than some other countries, with higher non-completion rates and longer average completion times. Reliable and regular data on these metrics are extremely difficult to come by, and direct international comparisons are made even more difficult through the differing methodologies employed. Instead, the DHET reports graduation rates<sup>6</sup> as a proxy for throughput. South Africa's 2016 doctoral graduation rate of 13%<sup>7</sup> is significantly lower than the UK figure of 23% for the 2015–2016 academic year<sup>8</sup>. This supports the suggestion that a level of inefficiency and/or leakage from the system remains. Cognisant of the constraints on the level of resourcing available to expand the number of PhD programmes on offer, some participants suggested that an emphasis on additional efforts to increase throughput, rather than enrolment, would be a more cost-effective way to achieve greater increases in PhD production. Indeed, if the graduation rate could be increased to the UK level, and South Africa's current population of 21,510 doctoral students remained relatively stable, this would yield the target of 5,000 PhDs per year. Conversely, if the 13% graduation rate remained constant, the population of doctoral candidates would need to grow to nearly 38,500 in order to meet the target.

Reference was made to a 2015 report on doctoral education in South Africa<sup>9</sup> which highlighted the impact on graduation rates of the high percentages of South African students who combine study with work. The CREST report '*Building a cadre of emerging scholars for HE in South Africa*'<sup>10</sup> also identified a range of further barriers to the career progression of emerging researchers in South Africa. Close attention should be paid to the issues detailed in these reports when designing and evaluating responses. Cohort-based training similar to the UK's collaborative doctoral training centres (CDTs) was discussed as a model that can deliver significant benefits for both completion rates and quality. USAf are currently working with UK partners to pilot the CDT approach in three disciplines in South Africa and the SARChi Chairs programme has also explored cohort models of research training.

<sup>3</sup> Government of South Africa, 'National Development Plan 2030' (2013) <[www.gov.za/issues/national-development-plan-2030](http://www.gov.za/issues/national-development-plan-2030)>

<sup>4</sup> Department for Higher Education and Training, *Statistics on Post-School Education and Training in South Africa* (annual) <[www.dhet.gov.za](http://www.dhet.gov.za)>

<sup>5</sup> Mouton et al., 'Building a cadre of emerging scholars for HE in South Africa' (2018) <[www.dst.gov.za](http://www.dst.gov.za)>

<sup>6</sup> Defined as the percentage of the full population of PhD candidates (from all cohorts) that graduate in a given year.

<sup>7</sup> Department of Higher Education and Training, 'Post-School Education and Training in South Africa 2016' (2018) <[www.dhet.gov.za](http://www.dhet.gov.za)> [2,797 of 21,510 PhD students graduated]

<sup>8</sup> Higher Education Statistics Agency, *Higher Education Student Data* (annual) <[www.hesa.ac.uk/data-and-analysis/students](http://www.hesa.ac.uk/data-and-analysis/students)> [22,835 of 98,560 PhD students graduated]

<sup>9</sup> Cloete, Mouton and Sheppard, 'Doctoral Education in South Africa', *African Minds* (2015) <[www.africanminds.co.za/dd-product/doctoral-education-in-south-africa/](http://www.africanminds.co.za/dd-product/doctoral-education-in-south-africa/)>

<sup>10</sup> Mouton et al., 'Building a cadre of emerging scholars for HE in South Africa' (2018) <[www.dst.gov.za](http://www.dst.gov.za)>

Further discussions around enhancing the quality of PhD provision and of the value of international scholarship programmes for increasing provision converged into a consensus around promoting greater use of the split-site PhD model. Participants were extremely appreciative of the value of international exposure and a period of study outside the country in creating a dynamic and vibrant academic community. Conversely, the issue of brain-drain was highlighted, with concerns raised that international scholarship schemes can be used by other countries to extract and recruit the brightest talent away from South Africa. The ACU-administered Commonwealth Scholarships scheme, funded by the UK Government, was singled out as an exemplar of good practice in this regard, as a scheme that achieves an extremely high rate of return for its scholars. Among the various programmes run by the Commonwealth Scholarships Commission in the UK, split-site PhDs were picked out as an especially attractive modality. By offering 12 months of study in the UK within a South African PhD, the scheme enables emerging researchers to reap the benefits of international exposure whilst remaining in the domestic system. There was considerable appetite expressed for an expansion of the number of such awards that could be made in South Africa and recognition given to the inclusion by the National Research Foundation (NRF) of split-site PhDs within its new funding mechanisms.

## Recommendations:

- 2.1 The ACU should **advocate for more split-site PhDs** among international scholarship funders.
- 2.2 The option to **incorporate 12 months abroad should be provided within all PhD programmes**, with an emphasis on Commonwealth countries with strong PhD programmes and broadly compatible HE systems.
- 2.3 **Efforts should be focused on enhancing PhD throughput and graduation rates** ahead of increasing the number of PhD programmes.
- 2.4 The DHET should commission **a horizon scanning of international initiatives to improve PhD throughput**, using the issues highlighted by the CREST study as a framework to identify examples that may be informative for developing South African responses.
- 2.5 **The pilot centres for doctoral training should be evaluated for their influence on throughput**, looking at both retention and time to completion.
- 2.6 The DHET and the NRF should consider how to **introduce more consortium-based models of doctoral training**.

# 3. SUPERVISION CAPACITY

Although no statistics illustrating the extent of the problem were offered among the presentations, many participants reported anecdotally that, for a variety of reasons, their institutions did not have sufficient numbers of staff able to offer high quality supervision for an increasing number of doctoral candidates. The reference to the quality of supervision was emphasised as a key consideration here, over and above a simple numerical assessment of capacity.

In reference to the quality of supervision, it was pointed out that there are currently no agreed standards and very limited guidance and training available for supervisors. As a consequence, there are also no means for recognising and incentivising good practice. This is by no means a unique situation for South Africa. In the UK, for example, the HE sector is only now testing a set of 'Criteria of Good Supervisory Practice'<sup>11</sup> and beginning to pilot Research Supervision Recognition within a handful of universities. As these initiatives develop, sector ownership and the involvement of research staff themselves in their design is seen as critical to success.

Training programmes for supervision skills have been developed domestically by some South African universities. However, their quality, consistency and impact has not yet been thoroughly tested, and current capacity is not yet sufficient to address the issue nationally. Additional resources may be necessary to evaluate and scale these initiatives up to increase the number of academics being trained.

With regard to the numerical element of the issue, additional mechanisms were discussed, including the recruitment of international visiting faculty to provide short-term capacity – with the suggestion that this could be targeted both at faculty members who had recently retired or who were soon to retire, and at early career academics and postdocs. This suggestion was qualified with a reflection that a clear programme of work and objectives are needed for each visiting academic, to ensure that their time is well used and the visit worthwhile.

In a link to the discussion around split-site PhDs, it was also noted that the co-supervision arrangements necessary for awards of this nature could also be leveraged to enhance wider capacity – either by complementing the expertise of a less experienced South African supervisor with that of a leading international academic, or by using experienced international faculty to provide mentoring in supervision skills to their less experienced peers in South Africa.

## Recommendations:

- 3.1 The ACU and USAf should explore the development of a **partnership to strengthen supervision capacity**.
- 3.2 They should collaboratively **design and trial criteria for good supervision**, potentially in partnership with other Commonwealth countries, in order to facilitate comparative analysis and peer learning.
- 3.3 **South African HEIs should seek funding and mechanisms to scale up supervision skills training** across all universities. This could include the expansion of existing training to academics from a wider range of institutions and/or training research support staff to replicate that training within their own institutions.
- 3.4 The **ACU should explore a scheme to attract visiting faculty** from across the Commonwealth, with doctoral supervision a key element of their remit. This should include a critical examination of past attempts to mobilise international faculty in this way, recognising that this approach has not always met with success.
- 3.5 **Split-site PhD programmes should be used as a way to mentor and support emerging researchers** in developing their supervision skills.
- 3.6 **Supervision practice should be built into PhD training** within collaborative doctoral training schools.

<sup>11</sup> <[www.ukcge.ac.uk/article/research-supervision-recognition-programme-pilot-launch-409.asp](http://www.ukcge.ac.uk/article/research-supervision-recognition-programme-pilot-launch-409.asp)>

## 4. ACADEMIC MENTORING SCHEMES

There was a strong consensus that mentoring schemes can play an important role in the professional development of early career academics. Quite a number of South African universities make mentoring available in some form or other to their academic staff.

However, there is considerable variation between institutions in the scope and reach of the schemes, and the ways in which they are managed and run. For example, some schemes are managed on a formal basis, while others rely on informal approaches; in some cases, mentoring relationships are structured and directed, while in others they are left to develop organically. Not all schemes offer guidance in how to make a mentoring relationship function effectively; some schemes offer training to both mentors and mentees; others offer guidance documents and some even provide mentoring to their mentors. There was a broad agreement that, resources permitting, formal schemes that set clear expectations and provide guidance and support are more effective.

Opinion was divided regarding the question of incentives and recognition for mentoring. Some argued that mentoring is most effective and of the highest quality when it is driven by altruism and a commitment to develop the next generation. Others

argued that busy and over-worked academics are unlikely to be motivated to engage with mentoring as long as it remains optional and unrewarded – and so recognition, potentially in the form of promotion points, was necessary in order to achieve the scale needed to make a significant difference.

What became clear from the rich discussions in this area is that while many institutions were convinced of the efficacy of their own approach, few had been able to use an evidence base – detailing which techniques work in which settings – as a basis for decisions on how to structure and manage their schemes. In line with this, the extent to which good practice and common challenges were shared and discussed between institutions was relatively limited.

### Recommendation:

- 4.1 There should be an **exploration of the effectiveness of the wide variety of approaches to academic mentoring** across the Commonwealth, to enable the sharing of good practice recommendations that reflect differences in context, culture and resourcing.

## 5. RESEARCH SUPPORT CAPACITY

World-class research needs to be supported by a world-class research management and researcher development function. This assertion was made, with no murmur of dissent, during one section of the discussion. However, in many South African universities, the researcher development function resides within the research office which is often already under-resourced. Without additional funding, many of these offices would struggle to take on the administrative load of running new or expanded mentoring schemes, hosting increased numbers of postdoctoral positions or managing an enlarged portfolio of collaborative research projects linked to split-site PhD programmes. Each of these initiatives requires significant levels of coordination and organisation, but the support structures that they would rely on are often inadequately resourced to provide that support effectively.

### Recommendations:

- 5.1 **Investment in early career support needs to go hand-in-hand with investment in the capacity of research support offices and their staff** to ensure that any new schemes are delivered effectively and sustainably.
- 5.2 The **ACU, USAf and SARIMA should convene a vice-chancellor level discussion on how to expand research support provision** with a focus on structures, resourcing, and measures of performance.

## 6. TEACHING AND RESEARCH NEXUS

A considerable level of discussion focused on the teaching and research nexus and the potential gains that could be made with better coordination and alignment between these two aspects of academic roles, regarding the professional development offered in each. In many institutions, professional development is provided to academic staff through two entirely separate structures: one office focused on supporting teaching, and another on their development as researchers. These offices are often located in different parts of the university, report through different deputy vice-chancellors (DVCs) and often have little interaction with each other. As a new university, Sol Plaatje University was a notable exception to this, having combined the two functions from inception.

A number of people reported a perception within their institutions that one or other of these two functions was prioritised over the other. In some cases, especially institutions with an emerging research profile, it was perceived that researcher development was being given precedence due to the income gains attached to an increased research portfolio. Conversely, staff from other institutions (especially the more research-intensive universities) felt that their educational developers were receiving greater favour, thanks to the continuing research profile of those staff and their tendency to actively publish research into teaching and learning. Whether or not these perceptions are justified, this point should serve as a reminder to institutional leaders to celebrate and communicate clearly the value of both aspects – and indeed the value of service to society as the third pillar of the university mission.

Mirroring the institutional silos mentioned above, it was noted that there is also very limited interaction and collaboration occurring between the Southern African Research and Innovation Management Association (SARIMA) and the Higher Education Learning and Teaching Association of Southern

Africa (HELTASA), the regional associations serving southern Africa for research management professionals and for educational developers respectively. It was suggested that a greater level of coordination between these two organisations could help to promote a more unified and joined-up approach to the professional development of academic staff at the institutional level.

Conversely, recognition was given to positive moves being made at the system level towards harmonising these two sides of academic development. Specifically, appreciation was voiced for the DHET's University Capacity Development Programme (UCDP) which has amalgamated the former Research Development Grants and Teaching Development Grants (as well as initiatives directed at students) into the University Capacity Development Grant (UCDG). Several universities noted that this move to a single, unified grant scheme was beginning to prompt dialogue and interaction between the two offices as they seek to align and enhance the respective elements of their UCDG proposals.

### Recommendations:

- 6.1 Better **coordination of activities and pooling of resources between researcher development and teaching and learning support** is needed in order to deliver efficiencies in operation.
- 6.2 The leaderships of **SARIMA and HELTASA should discuss opportunities for collaboration**, including the potential to organise annual conferences in tandem or to co-host a symposium for deputy vice-chancellors.
- 6.3 The DHET should continue to leverage the **UCDG to promote more holistic approaches to academic development**.

## 7. INVOLVING HR DIRECTORS

A considerable amount of discussion revolved around approaches to the professional development of academic staff, their terms of service, and approaches to promotion and recognition. Participants considered the framing of contracts, workloads and job descriptions, and suggested solutions involving workforce planning, scheduled study leave and actively managing teaching loads in order to create time for research. In order to take any of these suggestions forward, HR directors will need to be closely involved.

### Recommendations:

- 7.1 **HR directors should routinely be consulted in these conversations.**
- 7.2 Connections should be established between the **USAf HR Directors' Forum and the ACU HR in HE community** of practice.
- 7.3 The **ACU should explore bringing a conference of its HR in HE Community to South Africa**, enabling South African HR professionals to compare their experiences with those of their peers from across the Commonwealth.

## 8. COLLABORATION FOR INCREASED EFFICIENCY

Better coordination and sharing of resources across the sector and between institutions was advocated as a way to increase efficiencies. There are many institutionally-based researcher development schemes across the South African HE sector, with some wide variations in resourcing, scope and scale. Some institutions focus on core skills such as research methodologies, grant writing and getting published. Others branch out into a wider set of skills such as research communication and uptake, research leadership, managing teams and projects, work-life balance, supervision, career and professional development planning, presentation and networking skills, partnering internationally, interdisciplinary research and many others.

Few institutions, if any, were able to provide a comprehensive support offer to all their early career researchers and most report having gaps in capacity in some areas. However, across the country, there is such an impressive array of initiatives and training provision being delivered that there appear to be very few capacity gaps where the expertise, knowledge or a ready-made training offer does not already exist somewhere within at least one South African university.

There is therefore considerable potential to enhance impact if resources can be pooled across the sector, and mechanisms can be found to enable the wealth of support offerings, experience and initiatives that already exist to be shared, rather than recreated from scratch. With resources and funding constrained, investments can be made to stretch further than

they otherwise might if researchers are able to access proven training provision that has already been developed by or within another institution. This approach can also lend economies of scale to enable more niche areas of training that may not otherwise be economically viable. Where training and support offers do not currently exist, several institutions might consider clubbing together to create an initiative jointly.

A number of universities are beginning to offer training programmes on an open basis, to enable staff from other institutions to participate. There is also great potential for online and blended delivery of skills training and support, for example, following the model of the ACU's STARS programme.

### Recommendations:

- 8.1 **USAf should map existing training support and capacity gaps across the HE sector in South Africa** (and other African countries) with a view to a coordinated sharing of resources between institutions.
- 8.2 The **ACU should explore options to re-run the STARS training programme**, working with South African partners to refresh, update and expand the scope of the content.
- 8.3 The **DHET or USAf should establish a VC-led efficiency task force** to identify where sector-wide collaboration can reduce duplication and fragmentation, and to suggest how efficiencies can be achieved.

# 9. BUILDING A RESEARCH CULTURE THROUGH PEDAGOGICAL REFORM

No discussion of approaches to developing the capacity of early career researchers would be complete without consideration of the institutional culture in which they operate. It was acknowledged that many institutions need to work hard to create a culture more conducive to research in which staff are encouraged to openly question and challenge each other. Participants reflected on how intellectual debate can be stifled in many academic departments by social and cultural norms that encourage junior staff to defer to the views and opinions of their elders and those in more senior positions.

Without exploring more conventional approaches to fostering and incentivising a research culture, the discussion here took an unexpected turn. It was noted that the culture described above is nurtured from the undergraduate level, with traditional didactic pedagogies teaching students to defer to the views of their lecturers and not sufficiently encouraging them to challenge ideas and to engage faculty and each other in vigorous debate. This potential link between teaching practice and research cultures reinforces the points made above regarding the teaching and research nexus, and the importance of educational developers and research managers finding common ground. In a similar vein, it was noted that in Europe and North America, many institutions involve undergraduate students in research, and that this can also help to orient

departmental cultures toward research – as well as giving students a good grounding for postgraduate study and future research.

Previous studies have highlighted the impact that modern pedagogies, including approaches to blended learning, can have on the development of soft skills and critical thinking among students. But there has been little study of the impact that this can have on the research cultures within academic departments.

## Recommendations:

- 9.1 The NRF should invite **empirical study of the suggested link between teaching practice and research culture.**
- 9.2 Programmes of pedagogical reform should seek to help both **students and staff to acquire the skills and confidence to think critically, question and challenge one another.**
- 9.3 The **ACU should explore expanding its PEBL project** to southern Africa and other parts of the continent.
- 9.4 Universities should consider options to **encourage undergraduate students to participate in research.**

# 10. CONCLUSION

The recommendations articulated in this report are many and varied: a fact which in and of itself stands as testimony to both the breadth and the richness of the debate across the two days. Furthermore, there are recommendations expressed here which call for action from a wealth of different actors to take forward: there are recommendations for government; for public bodies and national agencies; for organisations representing the sector, such as USAf, the ACU and others; for universities themselves; for university leaders and for professional staff across a number of functions – and there are recommendations that call for different combinations of the above to work together to drive change forward.

Yet, despite this diversity in the 30 separate recommendations made here, one can detect a single common thread that runs throughout them all: the necessity for broad-based collaboration to achieve them. Collaboration, that is, that both runs across the sector in South Africa and draws on international partners from other parts of the Commonwealth. The huge appetite for this approach among the participants at the symposium, and the level of collegiality expressed within the discussions, bodes well for the country. Certainly, both the ACU and USAf stand ready to support and to partner with our members and the sector as a whole to drive this agenda forward, and to transform the future of the academic profession in South Africa.



The Association  
of Commonwealth  
Universities



# BUILDING A BETTER WORLD THROUGH HIGHER EDUCATION

The ACU is an international organisation dedicated to building a better world through higher education.

We believe that international collaboration is central to this ambition. By bringing universities together from around the world – and crucially the people who study and work within them – we help to advance knowledge, promote understanding, broaden minds, and improve lives.

We champion higher education as a cornerstone of stronger societies, supporting our members, partners, and stakeholders as they adapt to a changing world.

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