

Report: Research Indaba 2011

Introduction:

The 2011 Research Indaba was held at STIAS on 23 June 2011. This year the focus was on the Vice Rector: Research environment and the strategic plan for the environment. Of special focus was the maintenance and growth of the knowledge base at Stellenbosch University and the role of research – especially from the perspective of a university with a well-developed Africa network. A topic was selected within each of the VR(R) areas of responsibility, i.e. the Division for Research Development, the Postgraduate and International office and the Library and Information Services. The reasoning was to select a topic/theme within each environment that researchers are currently debating. The indaba was to provide a platform/opportunity for researchers at SU to actively debate/discuss different opinions relating to these topics/themes. It is important to get these opinions – not only to see if the support services within the VR(R) environment are on the right track in terms of their functions, but also for future strategic planning around research at SU.

Structure:

The indaba was opened by prof Arnold van Zyl (Vice Rector: Research) who provided the context for the discussion and background information on the strategic plan for the environment and the current status of the knowledge base at SU. This was followed by discussions around three main themes:

1. Internationalisation and international rankings
2. Diversification and growth of the postgraduate student corps and postdoctoral research fellows
3. Open access and scholarly publishing

For each of the themes, an introductory statement was provided followed by a panel discussion comprising researchers from different areas. This was followed by an open discussion.

The indaba was closed by providing a summary of the issues raised during the discussions. This report is to serve as a feedback on position statements from the representatives of the research community present at the indaba back to the Research Committee for further action.

Position statements/issues for further discussion/action per topic:

Internationalisation and rankings

1. SU should recognize the value of ranking and participate by providing our institutional information, but our core activities should not be determined by a concerted effort to get on the ranking lists. In other words, we should take note of the lists and the criteria (since international students, for example, actually look at rankings before deciding on postgraduate studies), but not use it to steer strategy. Our emphasis should be on relevance and excellence.
2. SU should find ways to encourage and support different research activities – individual work vs collaborative work? There is a discrepancy – also in the funding provided. Funding bodies encourage collaborative work but the money provided and the conditions of funding are very limiting and not attractive for international collaborators. NRF rating encourages individual work but there are distinct advantages to collaboration. SU should stimulate collaboration across disciplines and institutions – break the tradition of insularity. Collaborative work is important for international visibility.
3. Marketing and science communication plays a huge role in defining/creating an image of SU as a research intensive institution. We need that in order to recruit international collaborators, postgraduate students etc. We underestimate the importance of public relations in research.
4. We need to look into ensuring equal mobility opportunities for our researchers – for example look into strategic international conference attendance support, especially for young, upcoming academics.

Postgraduate students and postdoctoral research fellows

5. Marketing and science communication plays a huge role in defining/creating an image of SU as a preferred destination for postgraduate studies. We need that in order to recruit postgraduate students/postdocs etc. The role of social networking should not be underestimated.
6. Postgraduate students want to work in groups/be part of a research group – we must encourage interdisciplinarity and engage more as scientists.
7. SU needs to realize the importance of postdoctoral research fellows for the diversification and expansion of knowledge production – and for future collaborations. These researchers need to be nurtured and a culture of postdocs should be fostered and properly funded at SU – especially in strategic research areas // areas of core competencies.
8. The area of joint PhD`s should be investigated and encouraged by SU.
9. There is an urgent need to address the affordability of postgraduate studies at SU – especially in the light of extremely expensive living costs. Look into bursaries/free PhD education for top students. The AIMS model can perhaps serve as a good example.
10. We need to look into support mechanisms (not only financial) for our African students.
11. We need to foster research-mindedness, create critical readers – this lies at undergraduate level. Do we provide our undergraduate students with the necessary skills (not only content-based) to excel at postgraduate level?
12. We need to invest in our postgraduate core – create a comfortable space for them to work in, provide effective mentoring, facilitate skill development and identify champions to draw others.
13. We need to look into the mobility of postgraduate students and effective recruitment strategies to support this.
14. We need to actively market research as an attractive career opportunity and showcase examples of career paths of our young, upcoming researchers.
15. The value of diversity should be embraced – not only along racial lines, but also in terms of language, culture, gender, opinions etc. It should be acknowledged that diversity can also contribute to quality.

Open access and scholarly publishing

16. We need to lobby for the revision of the journal lists provided by government for accreditation.
17. The criteria to measure quality are bias towards the natural sciences and we need to revise how we deal with this at SU. There is an agreement that the "ranking" of journals and resulting differences in incentives for publications (SOS-funds for example) is a possibility – but then the criteria should be sensitive towards differences in areas of research.
18. Researchers are not well informed about the pro`s and con`s of open access publication – communication in this regard should be better (i.e. information sessions at faculty level perhaps?)
19. The affordability of open access should be discussed – a transparent process for the distribution of strategic awards should be communicated to researchers.
20. Ethically researchers have a responsibility to share knowledge, but ensuring ethical behaviour when publishing in open access and when using open access publications is problematic.
21. Ensuring the quality of open access journals is also problematic and there are concerns regarding the peer review system used in open access publications.
22. There are concerns regarding SUNscholar processes – especially with regards to the publication of theses (the issue of embargo`s for example) and the lack of protection of early data/ideas.

Other/cross-cutting issues

23. The research/teaching nexus and the effects it has on academic staff members should be debated/discussed at SU. What do we encourage in terms of the incentives we provide? How do we deal with non-performance? How do we deal with contract positions?
24. What is the appropriate/modified set of KPA's needed to maintain and consolidate the knowledge base of the SU?
25. What does SU do to support individual academic staff members to make their jobs easier in the light of the increasing demands being placed on them? (i.e. administrative burdens; timeous processes, the simplification of processes – for example ethics clearance, etc).
26. Full costing and IP margins still seem unclear – we need to ensure the protection of long term strategic industry relationships (eg. Costing of IP).
27. Which instruments can be used to maintain the research momentum and attractiveness of SU as a postgraduate and research destination?

RECOMMENDATION:

1. That this report be presented at a next meeting of the Research Committee for further discussion and identification of issues to be addressed at support level/faculty level/institutional level and that appropriate actions and responsible people be identified.
2. That the Research Committee work towards presenting possible solutions to the concerns raised in this report to a next meeting of Senate.
3. That the research community be kept informed on a continuous basis on the progress made regarding the issues raised in this report.

Compiled by the Division for Research Development
28 June 2011