

Research Professional has proved to be a reliable source of information on funding opportunities for African science and development. Lucy Irungu, deputy vice-chancellor for research production and the research environment at the University of Nairobi in Kenya, explains to journalist Justus Wanzala how her university's subscription has resulted in more funding, publications, and a greatly advanced academic profile.



The University of Nairobi is Kenya's oldest university, and it also houses the country's largest concentration of researchers. It has been a subscriber of *Research Professional* since July 2013. In a short time, the platform has had a profound effect on both the way researchers find funding opportunities, and their success in winning them, says Lucy Irungu.

"Research Professional provides information on opportunities in Africa and across the world. There is also information on funding for infrastructure, which is particularly useful here. The government of Kenya does not grant money for university infrastructure development, such as building new facilities," she says.

Getting a subscription was a no-brainer. Her office was impressed with Research Africa's target of expanding the research capacity in African universities. "This goal resonated with our own objectives, and was a logical way of enhancing research in our various colleges and schools," she says.

The results have not been slow to materialize. Staff at the university have used the platform to successfully find and apply for travel grants to travel to present their papers at international conferences.

"Staff members are now conscious of funding opportunities, given that the platform is a one-stop source of relevant information, an aspect that spares them the agony of aimlessly surfing the net to access funding opportunities," she points out.

Ranking success

Irungu attributes the university's entering the Top 10 of African universities in the 2014 Webometrics world university rankings to its *Research Professional* subscription. In January 2013 the university was in 14th place. Now the university leads the ranking both in Kenya and in East Africa.

"For several years, before the subscription to *Research Professional*, we'd not been among the top ten universities in Africa," she notes.

There is also a noticeable difference to the university's finances, she adds. The university's research income has grown to 3.6 billion Kenyan shillings in 2013—a phenomenal growth last year, she says. In addition, the number of academic articles stored in its online repository has grown to 38,000 papers. "Our repository is now ranked eighth in the continent and is receiving many hits," Irungu says.

Currently, 1 160 academic staff members are involved in research, a majority of the total staff of 1 600. The university is striving for every academic staff member to participate in research, and not just teach. Academic publishing is one of the conditions required for the promotion of teaching staff.

The research office, which was set up three years ago, has also noted an increase of proposals submitted by researchers at the university. This has translated to an increased workload for the research office, whose work is supplemented by committees in the college of health science and the college of agriculture.

Irungu expects proposal numbers to increase further as the university's embedding of *Research Professional* continues. The research office conducts sensitisation workshops with staff, and to date it has conducted three training sessions for teaching staff how to navigate the user-friendly platform.

Word of mouth also helps spread the word about *Research Professional* and its uses, she says. But emails are the most effective way of reaching out to staff, she adds, as they elicit the biggest response.

While *Research Professional* is helping the University of Nairobi's staff to identify suitable funding opportunities, they still struggle to find time to actually apply. Irungu says their workload is heavily skewed towards teaching and supervising postgraduate students.

There are ways around this, she says. For instance, the medical college has set up a research unit specifically for academics who will engage in research without participating in teaching. The university also spends some of its own money on tutoring young academics on how to do research. The research office trains academics on grant and funding proposal writing. A total of 360 academic staff have been trained in the last two years. The university also supports college-wide seminars on proposal writing and other key skills for researchers.

Long-lasting partnerships

International linkages and participating in research consortia is an important source of revenue and capacity building for the university, Irungu adds. At the moment, the university has over 200 formal international linkages. One of the

projects currently being collaboratively undertaken is on maize value addition, together with universities in West Africa and Mexico.

Another partnership includes UoN's College of Health Sciences and Uganda's Makerere University, as well as the College of Agriculture with Sokoine University in Tanzania. This partnership promotes the sharing of scientific information and expertise to help Kenyan authorities deal with infectious disease surveillance and control.

Irungu firmly believes *Research Professional*, and its news service *Research Africa*, will remain handy to the staff at the university. The sky is the limit insofar as winning research funding is concerned, she says. Among other things her office wants to hire a grant writer to assist staff members further in their applications for funding. This, she says, would really give researchers at the university an edge on the competition.

"We already undertake training, but the support that we currently offer is mainly to ensure that proposals meet basic threshold and institutional requirements, such as IP requirements and ethical standards. Going forward, we'd like to improve the scientific content and the English language of proposals for both local and external funding," she says.

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