

Establishing research management in **West Africa**

Despite the growth in regional and national research management associations in recent years, many regions still lack such a body. A recent conference in West Africa should help to fill one of these gaps, reports **John Kirkland**.

University research managers in Western Africa are set to form their own professional association for the first time, following a major conference in Lagos, Nigeria last November.

The conference was the brainchild of Professor Idowu Olayinka, of the Department of Geology at the University of Ibadan in Nigeria. Professor Olayinka said that the idea had first come to him when attending the annual meeting of the Southern African Research and Innovation Management Association (SARIMA) last May. The success of SARIMA, which since its establishment in 2002 has attracted several hundred members from throughout the Southern African region, as well as support from international donors and government recognition, represented a model from which West Africa could learn.

Replicating the SARIMA model in West Africa will be no easy task. In the early days of its development, the Southern African association was able to draw on the time and experience of universities that already have a significant international research profile, good communications and, in many cases, well-established research support offices. None of these conditions exists to the same extent in West Africa.

From the evidence of the November conference, however, the time is right for such an initiative. The fifty or so delegates attending represented over twenty universities, from Ghana and Sierra Leone as well as Nigeria. Reflecting the diverse structures in existence for research management at present, those attending held a variety of different positions, and included several Vice-Chancellors, Deans and senior academics.

Although few universities had well-established central offices for research support, several of the issues faced by research managers internationally were already being considered. Frameworks for government/industry/university collaboration were the subject of papers from Professor Ikenna Onyido, Vice-Chancellor of

the Michael Okpara University of Agriculture (Nigeria) and Professor E K Ogundowole, of the University of Lagos. A further paper, from Professor Valentine Aletor of the Federal University of Technology, Akure (Nigeria), addressed the issue of how endogenous research could be better utilised for national development. E S Nwauche, Associate Professor of Law at Rivers State University of Science and Technology (Nigeria), also presented a framework for the management of innovation and intellectual property issues in the sector.

Despite the depth of thinking that was already taking place, delegates agreed that there was a need both for new structures at the level of the university and for inter-university collaboration. Some funding had already been provided at the levels of individual universities, such as support from the Carnegie Corporation of New York at one Ghanaian and three Nigerian institutions in recent years. Generally speaking, however, these initiatives had not been widespread.

Three international speakers provided practical examples of how this could be achieved. Memunatu Pratt, of the Research and Development Services Bureau at the University of Sierra Leone, described a successful programme of activities to support academic staff with the preparation of external programmes, which appeared to be having some success in the attraction of external funds (*see page 20*). Saudin Mwakaje, of the University of Dar es Salaam, described a mechanism by which several universities in the Southern African Development Community (SADC) region had combined together to develop their expertise in intellectual property management.

Reflecting the desire to learn from the successful experience of Southern Africa, the meeting heard from Dr Tembeka Mpako-Ntusi, President-elect of SARIMA, about the origins, role and achievements of that organisation. One conclusion from the discussion was

that any new body should seek to develop its own communication tools and a small central secretariat as quickly as possible. SARIMA had also found it useful to extend membership beyond universities to those in research institutes, government and even the private sector with an interest in the issues. This represents another issue for consideration by the newly elected committee. In addition, Dr Mpako-Ntusi was able to present first-hand experience from her own institution (Walter Sisulu University for Technology and Science in South Africa) which as a newly merged university was also seeking to develop a new research culture.

In the final session of the conference, attention turned to the question of whether there would be support for a new regional association, and if so how it could be established. There was overwhelming endorsement of the need for such a body to be set up, and for Professor Olayinka as its first chair. An eight-person steering committee has also been appointed, and it is hoped that the University of Ibadan will provide the first base. Profits from the initial meeting, together with support from the Association of Commonwealth Universities, should be sufficient to appoint a full-time organiser for the first year of operation, during which membership and communication structures can be developed further. External support is being sought for additional activities, such as a two-day conference on preparing research applications and relations with donors. It is hoped that the first formal annual meeting and conference will be held by the end of 2007.

As with any organisation, survival during the first year will depend critically on resources, demand from potential members and the enthusiasm of the first committee. Only time will tell whether these will be sufficient. From the evidence of this first meeting, however, the prospects seem bright. **RG**

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