



ACU Measures Supporting Research Survey results

Executive summary

The results of the 2022-23 ACU Measures Supporting Research Survey provide a unique insight into the institutional support structures, priorities, and provisions that drive university research across the Association of Commonwealth Universities (ACU) global membership. The survey findings identify a range of mechanisms that underpin the production of research and the vital role played by universities across the Commonwealth as knowledge producers and knowledge implementers.

Crucially, the results highlight the current disparities and inequalities across the global research landscape. However, the survey also identifies significant synergies in research priorities and areas for investment and growth, providing participants, practitioners and policymakers with key insights to help address these inequalities.

As ACU Measures is anonymous, non-ranking and non-competitive, the report is able to present data and insights across hundreds of indicators related to research administration and knowledge production at a scale and level of detail the ACU has never previously had access to. This now enables the ACU to convene, represent and share best practice with our members better than the organisation has ever been able to before.

With 20% of the ACU's membership contributing to the survey, the responses provide extensive insights into the management of research portfolios across 95 higher education institutions in 29 countries from 5 continents - representing over 100,000 academic staff, 40,000 grant applications and 13,000 PhD students.

The 2022-23 ACU Supporting Research Survey identifies in detail the nature of uneven access to funding and support mechanisms across different regions and income country groups. Institutions in poorer countries were found to commit proportionally more than double the amount of their core institutional income to supporting research than their counterparts in High-Income Countries (HICs) and receive 50% less income from industry collaborations. Academic research is much more vulnerable to demand-side shocks in Lower Income Countries (LICs) – and is of particular concern given the higher impact of climate change and the challenges addressed by the SDGs in these countries.

The survey also reveals that over 50% of research budgets in HICs are funded by external grant income, and 88% of all research grant applications reported are submitted by these same institutions – at a rate of over 1000 applications per institution. In comparison, the figure for institutions in Least Developed Countries (LDCs) shows an average of just 44.

ACU Measures adopts a holistic view of research support, enabling data collection on the extent, availability, and deployment of institutional resource at different stages across the research lifecycle. The survey finds significant disparities in support for researchers and research administration support staff across the membership. 40% of African respondents indicated an absence of policies guiding university research costings (i.e. overheads) thereby impacting their ability to adequately recover the full economic costs of any research undertaken.

Other key factors contributing to these disparities are laid bare by the report. Whilst all institutions facilitate training and workshops for academic staff at some level, the survey highlights unevenness in the provision of institutional services and staff training to support academics across the research lifecycle.

Policies and systems for supporting grant applications and grant management are unevenly distributed with 97% of institutions in HICs having access to electronic systems and databases compared with only 43% in LICs. Institutions in HICs employ staff in significantly higher numbers in pre- and post-award management across the research lifecycle, whilst Low-Income institutions allocate a far greater proportion of Research Management Administration staff to policy or compliance related issues, perhaps reflecting the increasingly stringent accountability requirements of international funders.

Academic mentoring – seen as an essential mechanism for supporting the development of early career researchers - is undertaken by at least half of respondents in all regions but rates of 90% reported in Europe and the Pacific suggest that this model is standard practice, far outstripping respondents in other regions.

Globally 60% of academic staff hold a PhD but that figure rises to 80% for staff in HICs which is over three times the figures reported in low- and middle-income countries (LMICs) (24%) suggesting that even where mentoring is available there may be inherent differences in the extent or quality of provision.

The continuing importance of doctoral education is reflected in institutional research strategies. Only 5% of institutions do not have a stated research strategy and of those that do almost all institutions indicated seeking to increase their numbers of post-graduate students as a priority. Whilst this is to be welcomed, the report identifies a continuing gender imbalance in academic appointments as well as a significant skew in the supply of PhD students towards HICs.

Male academic staff still outnumber their female counterparts, comprising 57% of the reported academic population. A breakdown at the level of current PhD students suggests a more even gender distribution in the next generation of researchers, however, these figures are thrown into stark relief when we look at PhD enrolments by country income classification. The report identifies an indicative correlation between country income and female PhD enrolments from 51% in HICs declining to 21% in LDCs.

Enrolment by degree type identified an average student body of 84% Undergraduate, 13% Masters and 3% Doctoral students. Within these figures, the model for LMICs was heavily skewed towards undergraduates with only 1% of students enrolled at the doctoral level. Starker still, doctoral enrolment rates in HICs were 12 times higher than that of the least developed countries (LDCs), with significant implications for the creation of new knowledge and addressing the SDGs.

The survey highlights the continuing importance of research publication figures. 95% of all participating institutions viewed the number and quality of peer-reviewed publications as the most important indicator of the success of their research functions both in reference to individual staff promotion and the assessment of research impact at the institutional level.

With significant disparities in access and support in research emerging from the analysis, the ACU also questioned research professionals on the challenges they and their institutions faced. In a clarion call for the sector and its ability to meet the SDGs, over 50% of all respondents stated that translating research into sustainable outputs such as socio-economic or policy benefits was the greatest challenge they faced. Echoing this need and as well as further identifying the investment compromises being made by those operating in low-income countries, respondents stated an acute need for increased investment in the evaluation of research impact and in improving access to research management systems and software.

The full ACU Supporting Research Survey results have been shared with survey participants in the form of bespoke reports. The reports are a dynamic and interactive tool which allows participants and policymakers to interrogate the data at their desired level of disaggregation. The ACU seeks to impart no judgement on the data that has been provided by members and continues to welcome submissions to the survey in order to better inform the sector.

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