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Re-imagining the Role of Postgraduate Research towards a Research-Intensive University in Namibia

Rachel Ndinelao Shanyanana-Amaambo
Anna Niitembu Hako
Faculty of Education and Human Sciences
Department of Applied Education Sciences
Hifikepunye Pohamba Campus, University of Namibia

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Abstract

This paper explores the role of postgraduate research in contributing to and achieving a research-intensive university in Namibia, focusing on innovation and national development. Globally, research is widely recognized as a key driver of innovation and development, and universities play a crucial role in exposing students to research processes while researchers carry out research to address national challenges. However, to achieve innovation and contribute to national developmental goals, state funding is crucial for research activities in universities. According to Namibia's Vision 2030, which outlines a goal of becoming an industrialized society with healthy, empowered, innovative, confident, and determined citizens, research is seen as a key factor in driving national progress. The Ministry of Higher Education has developed policies to enable strong research and innovation systems, while universities have adopted policies to promote research for innovation and development. Despite these policies and endeavors, University of Namibia (UNAM) is ranked 16th out of the top 100 universities in Africa and falls short in international research and publication rankings. Therefore, this paper aims to address the following objectives: (a) to understand UNAM's strategies for promoting research for innovation and national development, (b) to conceptualize research-intensive universities, (c) to analyze UNAM's research policies and funding opportunities, and (d)

to assess the role of postgraduate research in achieving a research-intensive university in Namibia. This conceptual paper's main goal is to investigate UNAM's ideas on postgraduate research's role in becoming a research-intensive institution and its benefits to creativity and economic growth. This approach enables a discourse that can lead to a potential research framework that may assist UNAM's efforts to establish a research-intensive university environment, to contribute towards the realisation of Namibia's National Development Goals.

Keywords: Development, Namibia, Postgraduate Research, Research-Intensive University

Introduction

Namibia has improved since 1990 in addressing the unequal and inadequate educational conditions brought on by colonial apartheid. This is demonstrated by the significant financial resources that the Government of the Republic of Namibia (GRN) devotes to the system's upkeep and improvement, which accounts for about 23% of the country's annual budget (Ministry of Finance &Public Enterprises, 2021). Therefore, by virtue of the government's spending on education, the sector can be identified as a major priority of the government. Namibia's Vision 2030 statement also outlines the country's aspirations to become an industrialized, globally competitive nation with equitable opportunities that realizes its full growth potential while improving the standard of living for all Namibians. The goal for Namibia is to industrialize and develop by 2030, to offer enough education, and to change the majority of educational institutions so that they can better meet the needs of the nation's labor force. The country should have the knowledge and people resources necessary to make the transition from developing to fully developed industrial nation (UNAM, 2006). The Namibia National Development Plan [NDP] (2004) demonstrates the country's dedication to creating a successful, self-assured, knowledge-based society that honors and appreciates the characteristics that make Namibians distinctive individuals. According to Shanyanana (2011), Namibia Vision 2030 is based on the country's ability to create a knowledge-based society that will enable it to become a fully developed nation. The progress of a country depends on the generation and strategic application of knowledge (National Council for Higher Education, 2012).

However, regardless of the massive spending by the government and the Vision 2030 aspirations, the education sector still does not perform at the expected level. In particular, the research output of postgraduate studies remains at a low level in most fields of study (GRN, 2004). UNAM was co-ranked 16th among the top 100 universities in Africa in the 2023 Times

Higher Education World University Rankings (Namesho, 2023). This suggests that UNAM needs to strengthen its postgraduate research outputs to take a competitive position on the global stage alongside other universities worldwide. Kabende (2015) asserts that UNAM was facing difficulties in positioning itself to satisfy governmental requirements, which required a change in direction so that it could significantly contribute to the creation of knowledge and the development of human resources.

With these intentions, Namibia aspires to build a society that can serve as a solid foundation for both economic growth and social inclusion. Nevertheless, this cannot happen in a vacuum. Thus, UNAM, like other universities, will need dedication, tenacity, a sustained focus on quality and innovation, and ongoing development of research outputs from all stakeholders. Realizing the importance of knowledge creation and sharing for both the development of the economy and the relationship between research and innovation is essential. As a result, excellent postgraduate research will support the dissemination of information and the transfer of technology that are related to the accomplishment of Namibia's national development goals.

The National Science, Technology and Innovation Policy (NSTIP) (2020–2030) states that the Ministry of Higher Education, Technology and Innovation In order to accomplish the objectives outlined in Vision 2030, national development plans, and the global Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), MHETI (2021) is tasked with promoting research, science, and technology in the nation and creating an environment that is conducive to innovation. In line with this mandate, UNAM, as the custodian of NSTIP, uses the policy as the fundamental basis of the university's endeavors to produce a society that values innovation and scientific progress, which helps to increase Namibia's competitiveness as an industrialized country. It is evident in Namibia's vision that research is placed at the forefront of higher education. However, the question remains whether the research outputs in institutions of higher learning live up to the envisaged vision and will lead to a research-intensive university.

Therefore, this paper addresses the following objectives: (a) to understand UNAM's strategies for promoting research for innovation and national development, (b) to conceptualize research-intensive universities, (c) to analyze UNAM research policies and funding opportunities, and (d) to assess the role of postgraduate research in achieving a research-intensive university in Namibia. The discussion in this paper enables further dialogue that could lead to the creation of a research framework that may assist UNAM's efforts to establish a research-intensive university environment, with the potential to contribute to the realization of the country's National Development Goals.

Understanding research-intensive university

The university's crucial role is to create and disseminate knowledge to the world, including to the wider public. In other words, one of higher education's functions is to foster knowledge that can contribute to nation-building and help the country change. By serving as a resource for knowledge and experience, challenging conventional wisdom, and fostering innovation, universities should play a key role in advancing local communities and national development goals.

Jasper (1960) highlighted the opportunity that universities have to reconstruct human society, based on a comprehensive and intentional conception of knowledge. According to Njuguna (2020), the word "university" has come to represent a "universal" understanding of knowledge (p. 2). In support of Njuguna's idea, Barnet (2000) adds that "universal" has three senses: First, there are no limitations to an investigation. In theory, any inquiry is a universal inquiry because it has the potential to lead anywhere across many fields of knowledge; hence, one cannot predetermine boundaries. Second, anyone may potentially criticize that information. Everyone is eligible to comment on knowledge claims. Therefore, knowledge claims ought to be transparent and entirely in the public domain. A knowledge claim is a universal assertion in this sense. Third, a university is, in theory, open to everyone in the sense that any exclusion is not predetermined. Universities are global societies that welcome students from all over the nation (Barnet, 2000). According to Jasper, the modern university serves four purposes: (a) research; (b) instruction; (c) professional training; and (b) the dissemination of a certain culture.

On the notion and role of a university, former U.S. President John F. Kennedy, quoting English poet John Masefield, remarked that, "There are few earthly things more beautiful than a university." Those words still hold true today. Kennedy noted that Masefield made no mention of university greens, ivied walls, spires or towers, but admired the university's exquisite beauty by stating that it was "a place where those who hate ignorance may strive to know, where those who perceive truth may strive to make others see" (Kennedy, 1963, p. 539). Therefore, a university should be a place where students are exposed to relevant knowledge that could transform their society and the world at large. Thus, there is no doubt that the people who carry the distinction of graduating from such institutions of higher learning will continue to provide a high level of public service and support through their lives and their talents.

Considering the above conceptions of a university, our critical questions are:

- What could be the purpose of a university in an independent country such as Namibia?

- Why should one choose to attend a postgraduate program at a university?
- What should this student expect to emerge with after completing the course?

Various scholars have investigated these questions in literature. Lee (1996) indicated that the aim of higher education (specifically universities) is to graduate students who will become productive citizens after the completion of their studies. He based his argument on the notion that a higher education institution is a social unit, where everyone is a member of the university and is equally responsible for ensuring that all activities of the university are geared toward producing productive citizens of the country. He maintained that students, faculty, administrators and other staff should try to make sure that postgraduate students are well prepared to become productive citizens and live a prosperous life upon completion of their courses. This can only be achieved if all members involved cooperate and collaborate to achieve common institutional goals.

Many conceptual frameworks explaining higher education goals have been documented in the literature. Barnett (2004), for example, analyzed the most crucial functions of higher education. In the first place, the purpose of higher education is to motivate and assist people in maximizing their potential throughout life, enabling them to advance academically, prepare for employment, make a positive contribution to society and reach their own goals. Just as importantly, higher education aims to meet the demands of a knowledge-based, flexible, and sustainable economy and encourage the growth of knowledge for its own sake and its applications to the economy and society.

SDSN Australia/Pacific (2017) highlights the significant contribution of research to providing members of the global community with the information, supporting data, remedies, technologies, methods, and inventions.

Both established disciplinary methods and more recent interdisciplinary, transdisciplinary, and sustainability science methods are required. Research also helps developing nations enhance their capacity for conducting and utilizing research, working with and supporting innovators. This demonstrates the importance of research, specifically at the postgraduate level.

Additionally, the International Alliance of Research Universities (IARU, 2018) asserts that investing in research and development (R&D) is the cornerstone of every nation’s resource for improving its status worldwide. Additionally, it works with and supports creative businesses to increase the capacity of developing countries in conducting and utilizing

research. Therefore, research-focused colleges are one of a nation's greatest assets because they hold the key to protecting its future, especially in the increasingly dangerous and unpredictable changing global setting, which has arisen as the result of occurrences such as the COVID-19 pandemic or droughts and floods brought on by climate change. Universities that undertake considerable research greatly enhance the economy of the country. It is important to note that, through basic and applied research, the advancement of the people and the country. endeavor can be easily achieved, new discoveries made, and intellectual capital attained. IARU (2018) states that a research-intensive university could be measured based on its possession of educational standards with physical space; cutting-edge infrastructure; an inventive spirit; technology to support the creation of ground-breaking research, the dissemination of new knowledge, and the advancement of understanding by researchers, academics, and students in the essential knowledge ecosystem.

Globally, universities place their focus on research over teaching and learning. However, UNESCO (2017) claimed that less than 1% of the gross domestic product is spent in African nation (GDP) on R&D. The 1% research investment is disquieting, even though Africa has close ties with nations such as the United States and China, which contribute 28% and 20% of worldwide R&D investments, respectively. Evidently, the African continent's governments do not invest a sizable portion of their GDP on research, which explains why the universities' budgets for R&D are very small (UNESCO, 2017). Similarly, SCIMAGO (2019) shows that universities and research institutes in Africa are rated and ranked poorly for their performance, publications and innovative research. Such rankings for universities throughout the world by Quacquarelli Symonds have focused on four inclusion criteria for a research-intensive university: (a) the success of the university measured by the research and publication caliber, (b) the employability of its graduates, (c) the quality of instructions, and (d) its international standing.

Recent studies have shown that enrollment in African universities is increasing, indicating a good chance that more scientists may be found within them. However, the institutions' ability to improve is declining. The decline in government support for institutions and research raises the issue of why outstanding academic personnel are leaving Africa to explore high-quality research abroad (Mohamedbhai, 2014; Olowela et al., 2019).

Moreover, academic peer review and scientific publication have continued to be used as a standard ranking method. Olowela et al. (2019) argue that researchers and academics in Africa should explore why African institutions perform so poorly with regard to research, innovation and publication output. Secondly, they should examine why the government's

attitude toward research is unfavorable, despite the instability of the world economy.

Other worries include the few remaining researchers who are defending low incentives and students who are protesting or striking against crammed classes and unfriendly study environments. As a result, action is essential to redress and transform the status quo. Although higher education in Africa is advancing, more scientific publications from the continent are urgently required.

Clearly, national investments and the role of research for development have been emphasized. IARU (2018) revealed that national spending on R&D has continued to be a crucial factor that can improve universities' research standing and ensure competitive advantage in the scientific and technology scene. Universities that prioritize research play a significant role in their societies and abroad by enabling their nations to advance civilization through higher learning and research. It is significant to remember that research and publications should transcend the desire for promotion. Odeyemi et al. (2019) assert that topics of scientific value should be covered in publications, rather than writing for publicity's sake. To gain an understanding of the extent to which UNAM policies and programs advance a research-intensive agenda, what follows is an analysis of the conceptions of postgraduate research within the UNAM Higher Degrees Policy and programs.

UNAM Postgraduate Research Policy and Programs: An analysis

The newly formed universities in African republics were founded with the lofty expectation that they would significantly contribute to the growth of society and the economy. African universities were therefore viewed as serving the needs of most of the population in a nation, rather than just serving as centers for higher education research, teaching, and dissemination (Yesufu, 1974, as cited in Kirby-Harris, 2003). African universities were expected to produce the knowledgeable human resources required to run newly independent nations, to produce developmentally relevant research, and to engage in community service, according to Saint (1992, as cited in Kirby-Harris, 2003).

Namibia is one such African nation. According to Hopson (2001), correspondingly, Namibia's progress of higher education depended on changing the Namibian society. Its higher education system comprises three main institutions: the two state institutions, UNAM and the Namibia University of Science and Technology (formerly known as Polytechnic of Namibia), and a private university, the International University of Management. This paper focuses on UNAM. The university was founded in 1992 by an act of parliament (University of Namibia Act, No. 18 of 1992),

with a variety of responsibilities as a university in a nation that had just gained independence. Providing higher education through teaching and research was one of those responsibilities given to UNAM. To achieve national development, UNAM must implement the recommendations of the act (Bull et al., 2012).

Therefore, to fully capitalize on the advantages of the Fourth and Fifth Industrial Revolutions. As stated in its vision, mission, and mandate, UNAM aims to become a stronger, more cohesive university that is equipped to tackle the sophisticated challenges and technology of the 21st century. The national university has developed and continues to transform its strategic plan (regularly publishing updates) and policies toward the realization of its core mandates and envisioned status of an intensive-research university. To this end, the academic programs and management structures at UNAM align to the industrialization and domestic economic growth policies of the government (UNAM, 2016).

Consequently, the aims of UNAM are:

> to provide higher education, to undertake research, to advance and disseminate knowledge, to provide extension services, to encourage the growth and nurturing of cultural expression within the context of the Namibian society, to further training and continuing education, to contribute to the social and economic development of Namibia and to foster relationships with any person or institution, both nationally and internationally. (University of Namibia Act, 1992).

UNAM's 2016–2020 Strategic Plan states the university's vision to be: "To be a beacon of excellence and innovation through teaching, research, and community services" (UNAM, 2016). The university's mission statement is given in this document as:

> The University of Namibia strives to provide quality higher education through teaching, research, innovation and community services to our customers with the view to develop productive and competitive human resources capable of creating and driving public and private institutions towards a knowledge-based economy, economic growth and improved quality of life. (UNAM, 2016)

The recently revised UNAM 2021–2025 Strategic Plan provides new vision and mission statements. The updated vision is "to be a sustainable international hub of excellence in higher education, training, research, and innovation by 2030" (UNAM, 2023) and the mission is now stated as: "to contribute to the achievement of national and international development goals through the pursuit of translational research, quality training and innovation" (UNAM, 2023). These statements and subsequent changes

represent praiseworthy attempts to position the university in its crucial context, define its mission clearly, and to transform the national university into a center of intensive research on a local and global scale. Undoubtedly, through the implementation of this strategic plan, UNAM aspires to make certain that all of its efforts are coordinated toward the common goals of reducing inefficiencies, boosting performance, and creating employable, high-quality graduates.

Namibia, like other nations in Africa, has also embarked on the journey of transforming key universities into research-intensive institutions. Fredua-Kwarteng (2021) asserts that every university in Africa now uses the term "scientific research" in its purpose and vision statement. Several African colleges have declared that they hope to have a strong focus on research in the near future. Others have as their aim to provide the best instruction, learning opportunities, research and community-engagement initiatives. Others seek to collaborate with researchers throughout the world for their mutual benefit. This clearly demonstrates Africa's agenda to promote research at universities towards the realization of national development goals.

In addition, the job description for academics at UNAM (2023) specifies that 60% of academic time should be spent on teaching, 30% on research, and 10% on community service. The underlying presumption is that since research is included as a second fundamental mandate in the vision and job description, university administration and academic practice should support postgraduate programs for high-quality research outputs. However, despite all of these well-crafted research policies, the vision, mission and strategic plan, UNAM still faces low research output, weak marketing of research and innovation, the absence of a research framework to monitor research impact, aging and inadequate infrastructure and facilities, inadequate funding for research and innovation, insufficient electronic learning resources, outdated institutional structure, insufficient human capital in certain academic areas, and a high workload and overloaded curriculum (UNAM, 2023).

Similar hindrances were also reported by Fredua-Kwarteng (2021), who asked whether this is only a pointless rebranding effort and whether the institutions are working seriously toward these commitments. Proposing an appropriate approach to analyze whether such higher education institutions claiming to be "research intensive", Fredua-Kwarteng (2021) states that the best way to respond to these queries is to continually and thoroughly monitor the organizational culture of the colleges making those claims. This is because observations of African universities show that the majority have a weak, nonexistent, or static culture of scientific research. Despite their

claims of being research oriented, teaching still plays a major part in their curriculum.

However, without a thriving scientific research culture, it is unlikely that a university may accomplish greatness in research or contribute to the transformation of its country through the creation, use, and dissemination of knowledge. Fredua-Kwarteng (2021) identified institutional leadership as a significant challenge in causing institutional stakeholders to recognize and internalize scientific research norms, procedures and output as a valuable, desirable and ongoing endeavor. Leadership calls for a variety of abilities, including the capacity to formulate a vision, communicate frequently, listen with empathy, intuitively grasp human motivation, be tenacious in one's mission, and be skilled in building relationships with others. The emergence of a scientific research culture at African universities is hampered by inefficient institutional leadership. If an intensive-research culture is to be attained by 2030, UNAM, like other African universities, should therefore place its focus on devising various strategies, such as preparing promising junior students for high-level research projects both locally and abroad, which can help UNAM overcome its current difficulties. The university's leadership should provide development programs with the necessary tools and resources. Similarly, promoting the culture of research and publications demands substantial investment in postdoctoral fellows at all faculties/campuses and the appointment of adjutant researchers. These measures will assist UNAM in moving closer to becoming a research-intensive university.

A re-imagined role of postgraduate research for a research-intensive university

As previously stated, a national higher institution can readily present itself as an institution that prioritizes research that attracts more international academics and collaborators. There is a need for Namibian leaders to understand that R&D advances more quickly in nations whose governments support research, fund innovative ideas, and have given priority to R&D in their economic agendas. To achieve this goal, Namibia must increase the amount of funding allocated to research in its national budget, build a robust research workforce, and increase public investment in knowledge and research. Due to what appears to be a lack of a regional trend toward pursuing technology and a climate focused on research, Namibia, and notably UNAM, are losing promising researchers to other nations. Although UNAM's vision and mission statements recognize the need of investing in R&D, underfunding of research activities has had negative effects.

According to Jacob and Meek (2013), the government has to pay more attention to institutional support and finance to create a productive

research environment. It has been stated that enhancing university achievements necessitates an investment driven by the national strategic goal and matched with sound governance. In order to advance fundamental and applied research for development, universities, government and industry must first work together as effectively as possible. According to Altbach (2015), institutions must promote both basic and applied research in order to foster an environment that is research-intensive. Basic research needs to be promoted at the university level to generate concepts like principles, hypotheses, and practices that will advance knowledge. Higher education institutions and governments must safeguard this collaboration. The outcomes of basic research are included in applied research for the advancement of technology and the economy. While many of the cooperating nations fund basic research through academic institutions, industries are eager to take the lead in applied research and technological advancement.

Most importantly, UNAM, with government support, must prioritize technology and innovation from the perspective that by creating robust research governance and enabling structures, institutions may create and innovate. Fredua-Kwarteng (2021) proposes mechanisms to achieve an intensive research culture, whereby the leadership team of the institution generate and mobilize the resources required for scientific research and gather the political resolve needed to develop institutional research capabilities. This is because an essential component of research culture is the growth of research capacity. To achieve this, the university must train more aspiring and established researchers, encourage senior researchers to guide and mentor junior researchers. Likewise, there is a need to offer the bare necessities for conducting research, such as labs, equipment, libraries, and effective systems for the storage, retrieval, and use of information. Additionally, it requires contacting local and worldwide private financing sources as well as advocating for increased government funding. Furthermore, it entails creating guidelines, rules, and associated projects that promote the accomplishment of researchers at all stages of their careers.

Correspondingly, for UNAM to become a research-intensive university, it must have a high postgraduate profile and a sizable number of students enrolled in postgraduate research. For instance, one way to accomplish this may be to introduce a minimal benchmark. Therefore, a university can promote a scientific research culture by implementing programs such as; research symposiums for both students and teachers, graduate research conferences where graduate students can submit their own research findings, and research awards that honor excellence in research (Fredua-Kwarteng, 2021).

Indeed, an essential component of research culture is the growth of research capacity. Fredua-Kwarteng (2021) offers some strategies: The university should just provide the minimal necessities of research infrastructure, such as labs, equipment, libraries, and effective information storage, retrieval, and usage systems. Senior researchers should teach and coach junior researchers. It requires contacting local and worldwide private financing sources, as well as advocating for increased government funding. Additionally, it entails creating guidelines, policies and programs that assist the advancement of researchers at all career phases, such as minimizing the workload of academic employees engaged in scientific research.

Other worthwhile opportunities for UNAM include making the most of high-level government support, pursuing funding for initiatives aligned with high-level government initiatives, creating active memoranda of understanding with other organizations and industries. In addition, UNAM seeks for collaborative research opportunities, continuing the improvement of academic programs, making the most of the enormous opportunities provided by the Fourth Industrial Revolution, and looking into the availability of new technologies.

This approach could potentially assist the university to use its key asset—human resources, that is, academics (with doctoral degrees) located at different campuses, especially at satellite campuses, who are currently not participating in postgraduate research supervision and whose interests in research are minimal. UNAM's policy of publications before graduation (as highlighted in its Higher Degree Policy) could be employed to ensure that students and their supervisors publish research prior to their graduation. While acknowledging significant milestones reached by UNAM over the past 5 years with regard to research publications and innovation, the lengthy project of fostering a scientific research culture demands determination, persistence, and a greater comprehension of how a scientific research culture may be integrated into an institution's overall culture.

Conclusion

Universities were founded to demonstrate the theory of knowledge, particularly in relation to its techniques, validity, and extent as well as the distinction between opinion and a reasoned belief. However, over time, universities evolved and expanded their curricula to encompass a wide range of disciplines, including the arts, sciences and humanities. Today, universities serve as centers of research, innovation and critical thinking, and they play a crucial role in preparing individuals for a wide range of careers and how those careers might be meaningful to society. Higher education is important because it provides individuals with the knowledge and skills they need to succeed in their chosen fields, and it helps to promote social and

economic mobility. Namibia can build a more just and equitable society where everyone may flourish by granting access to higher education.

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