

NAMIBIA: Calls mount for national research commission

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Namibia's Ministry of Education has been urged to speed up the process of establishing a national commission on research, science and technology, and a research fund, as prescribed by the Research, Science and Technology Act of 2004. The country's first academy of sciences is also in the pipeline.

The University of Namibia's (UNAM's) research and publication department is leading the call. Its research coordinator Professor Isaac Mapaure told *University World News* that the lack of a national research fund was limiting funding and incentives to publish.

"UNAM researchers are aware of the NRF [National Research Foundation] in South Africa which rewards researchers and their universities for publishing journal papers. They bemoan the lack of a similar national arrangement in Namibia."

A research fund, Mapaure said, would provide incentives for and increase research and publication output by Namibia's higher education institutions.

He remarked that while the country's national university had the largest concentration of brain-power capable of conducting high level research in numerous disciplines, limited research funding and heavy teaching loads were handicaps.

"Most staff members are heavily loaded with teaching such that they have little time for research activities. One way to alleviate this problem is by creating a fund specifically to hire relief lecturers who can teach for given periods of time while the incumbent conducts research."

Mapaure noted that apart from the university's own research incentives, a national commission would be an ideal external organ to not only incentivise research but also grade researchers.

Director of research, science and technology in the Ministry of Education, Alfred van Kent, noted that all of the operational instruments for the two research entities were in place, but lack of resources was hampering progress.

"I am optimistic that we will get funding for them this year. We've done our level best to motivate the importance of these bodies for national development", he said.

Meanwhile, UNAM has welcomed the envisaged establishment of Namibia's first Academy of Sciences, which is currently under discussion.

The Academy of Sciences of South Africa, and Germany's equivalent Leopoldina are working closely on this project with a committee chaired by the director of UNAM's Teaching and Learning Improvement Unit, Dr Erika Maass, and the Namibian government.

Maass said that although the body would benefit from government support, it would function independently from it. It would comprise noted scholars who have published widely and enjoy the respect of their peers.

The committee is busy finalising a budget, a constitution and criteria for selecting founding members of the academy. She expects the body to be up and running by the end of this year.

Isaac Mapaure said advice to government was currently piece-meal, and that an academy of sciences would enable higher education to give coordinated advice to the government in various sectors of the economy.

The university has key centres dedicated to research. Its Multi-disciplinary Research Centre conducts and promotes high-level applied research in priority areas of national importance, and the Central Consultancy Bureau is an income-generating unit mainly focusing on short-term commissioned research and training.

Research focuses include the Sam Nujoma Marine and Coastal Resources Research Centre in the coastal town of Henties Bay. It is a centre of excellence and an operating unit of the United Nations University that has carried out groundbreaking research in seaweeds, fish, mushrooms and coastal agriculture. The Zero Emissions Research Institute specialises in mushroom research and training communities in mushroom production.

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