African Universities' Research Approaches (AURA) Programme Materials: Engaged Excellence in teaching and research

Online Conference: Researchers of the future: 21st Century Approaches for effective global research
2-4 November, 2015. Co-hosted by the AURA Programme and WHO HIFA-Fr.

aura

RESEARCHERS OF THE FUTURE: 21ST CENTURY APPROACHES FOR EFFECTIVE, GLOBAL RESEARCH

Day 1 discussion, 02nd November 2015

Topic 1: How has research shifted in practice? Experiences from the field from WHO-HIFA-Fr and other institutions and individuals working in a global research context.

The WHO HIFA-Fr in collaboration with the **AURA Programme Consortium** convened a three day online learning event and facilitated discussion on Monday, 02nd November and will run until Wednesday, 04th November 2015 with various African Universities and other global stakeholders. The purpose of the event is to think about and discuss the changing research context and also what implications that may have for researchers of the future. A recording of this discussion is available on https://sites.google.com/site/auraprogrammeinterventions/LearningInterventions/aura-r-1-learning-intervention/regional-learning-event-2-4-nov-2015/-day-one-how-has-research-shifted-in-practice-over-time/conference-presentations-day-one. This present post is an informal summary of some of the discussions that took place. Please feel free to discuss and elaborate on the points made.

Mark Hepworth, from Loughborough University, provided the opening address and gave an overview of the AURA programme and highlighted the flow of the programme discussions for the day. He created a context for the discussion by stating that researchers need to: "to identify emergent problems" in research while gaining the "attention of policy-makers and the public". Through "testing new approaches for addressing [these] problems" future researchers are "taking the lessons of local experiments to scale" while to "build partnerships with innovators and with policy-makers to ensure that research is part of a learning process".

Gerry Bloom a co-convenor of the Health and Nutrition Cluster at the Institute of Development Studies (IDS) kicks off the discussion as the first of five conference speakers and talks about the speed of multiple interconnected changes and the rising expectation of people for effective health services and what this means for research practice. He highlights economic factors that are impacting health policy reforms with implications for health and health systems. He acknowledges that governments are under pressure to meet rising access of health services and with no one-fit solution explains that research can make an important contribution. Bloom's reflects on his own personal experiences working on different studies in China to identify emergent problems and ensuring that it reached the attention of policy-makers and the public. He suggests that research must be evidence based and impact policy maker's decisions or at least identify the problem, document it and bring it to the attention of policy makers. Referring to conducting large scale research, looking at solutions that could be taken to scale and working with many stakeholders, innovators to test new approaches for addressing problems, one should monitor what works and why and how it could be adapted to local implementation and too also consider the unintended outcomes of the research being undertaken. In order to envisage a different role for researchers being more involved future researchers will have to develop new approaches to research thereby seeing a rapidly changing more equitable societies.

The next speaker to present was **Shandana Mohmand**, an IDS Fellow and part of the Governance Cluster at the Institute of Development Studies (IDS). Mohmand recognise that policy questions require a different approach and that researchers working on policy issues need to be open to all the possibilities and innovative about the ways in which these questions are approached. She also recognises the complexity of coming up with appropriate policy responses to the problems and that "policy questions require a very different approach". Many highlights the complexities in the policy world and that we are able draw on ideas now of what are more holistic ways to approach research questions. There is what we call the systems approach, the political economy approaches currently undertaken and more recently we see mixed methods approaches used. She points out the existing

African Universities' Research Approaches (AURA) Programme Materials: Engaged Excellence in teaching and research

**Online Conference: Researchers of the future: 21st Century Approaches for effective global research
2-4 November, 2015. Co-hosted by the AURA Programme and WHO HIFA-Fr.**

aura

challenges still evident in applying mixed approaches. It opens a distinct, rigours approach to complex policy questions and applying mixed methods. The speaker encourages being more open to methods, approaches and disciplines and more collaborative ways so that we are able to get more complete answers to the questions we're asking".

The third conference speaker introduced was **Jethro Pettit**, Director of Teaching and Learning and Research Fellow at the Institute of Development Studies (IDS). He shares his own experiences in doing research around issues of citizen engagement in governance and efforts to "strengthen civil society" and "understanding the experience of the citizen". He shared experiences of carrying out research for a major bi-lateral aid organisation that wanted to know about whether its approach to strengthening civil society in Africa, Asia, and Latin America was relevant and was aligned to realities of people living in poverty and marginalisation. He goes on to state that using "innovative" techniques e.g. 'Reality Check' i.e. "ethnographic emersion" assists with specific contexts and understand the multi-dimensional nature of a specific research problem. He explains that research appears to becoming "more longitudinal". Learning from research must be embedded in the research highlighting that what was referred to as 'rational passivity' - tactical decisions that people were having to make and that tactical collusion with power and with patronage systems prevented them from being active engaged citizens in the sense that many development programmes expected. Petit points to implications for the future of research and the role of researchers, thinking in multi-dimensional ways about research approaches, designing the approaches appropriately to meet the needs of the particular research. "And above all to think about ways that all the stakeholders in the research can be part of the analysis as well as the provision of data".
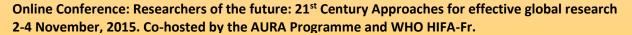
A debate took place between the first 3 speakers regarding the notion of complexity and the implications on research and social policy.

Jethro Pettit argued that complexity has to be understood in two ways. Firstly on how complex the dynamics of society, environment, economics politics and change are and how interact with them. Secondly, complexity deals with multiple perceptions and perspectives. The role of the researcher is to take into account both of them. **Gerry Bloom** adds that people become interested in complexity in the health sector because a number of studies in the past few years have found that the design of policy was much less important than the process of implementation, this is what is called implementation research. This means to question how to take a good idea and the use it to change and while doing this many unexpected things happen thus it became clear that there is not a straight connection between policy and outcome.

Shandana Mohmand argued that policy implementation has become more complex as well. Governments are dealing with larger population in more concentrated spaces; cities are becoming unmanageable given the sort of growth that is happening and the citizen's expectations of the state.

Mark Hepworth questions if the emphasis on learning while one is actually implementing or conducting research causes tension. To which **Shandana Mohmand** responds that it has made people move out of their comfort zones and creates all kinds of pressures, making the process challenging and critical.

Gerry Bloom puts a turn on this idea by mentioning the cases of Bangladesh and China which have had positive results based on their capacity of learning and innovating form small scale innovations. JP argues that there's a need for learning process approaches in the way policy is reformed but the funding environment has worked against this. It is based on predetermined results that need to be achieved and designs that need to be submitted. There should be a more flexible framework that allows an action learning or implementation approach.

African Universities' Research Approaches (AURA) Programme Materials: Engaged Excellence in teaching and research

Online Conference: Researchers of the future: 21st Century Approaches for effective global research
2-4 November, 2015. Co-hosted by the AURA Programme and WHO HIFA-Fr.

aura

The debate continues based on the idea of a transformation of research connecting with the real world problems and trying to make a difference but also of those implementing change. It is important to understand that big reforms can't take place without having evidence.

Finally the participants point out the importance for researchers of having classical skills and many new skills such as understanding the context, the use of social media, the need to network and create networks. **Gerry Bloom** argues that new researchers need to have the classical skills and many new skills which is very challenging for them but it is also important to take into account the leadership of the research institute to adapt to this new challenges. **Jethro Pettit** adds that for research communication and uptake it is important to use all sorts of opportunities for innovation if that space is available for people to engage with.

The fourth speaker was **Laura Camfield** has been working in an inter-disciplinary way since the early 2000s, trying to use mixed methods approach. In the last five years since joining UEA her work has focused around methodology and particularly pedagogies of teaching inter-disciplinary and mixed methods. **Laura Camfield** talks about the differences between multi and inter-disciplinary approaches. The first one means to bring multiple disciplines together but not necessary interacting whereas inter and transdisciplinarity means to move beyond that attempting to get people engaged quite critically with paradigms held by other disciplines. Finally, post-disciplinarity is a situation often said to be reached within development studies where people are less strongly attached to their particular disciplines, which could be problematic because being grounded to a particular discipline gives you an important perspective on your own practice and on launching into a critique of other's peoples work.

She highlights the importance with dealing with areas that involves social change with far more complex problems. She argues that there has been a move towards multi-disciplinary research. She makes the point that it is not just about people getting access to a toolkit but that we should not lose the strengths, how they perceive the world and not loose these distinctions. If this were not done, we would move to post-disciplinary vision that could lead to some problems within research. It is useful for different researches to collaborate and work together on research problems. The adaptability is fundamental.