



Image: African Research Universities Alliance

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AFRICA

**ARUA sets target for increased research outputs, more PhDs**

Francis Kokutse 09 June 2022

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The African Research Universities Alliance (ARUA) has launched a strategic plan covering the period 2022-27 as a framework towards increasing the African continent’s contribution to global cutting-edge research output to 5% over a period of 10 years.

ARUA is a network of 16 selected flagship research universities in Africa with a common vision to expand and significantly enhance the quality of research carried out by African researchers. The network has been operational since March 2015, when it was inaugurated in Dakar, Senegal.

The alliance has been active in positioning research universities on the continent and sees the higher education sector as key role players in informing and executing the education and development targets of the African Union’s Agenda 2063.

The **strategy** underscores the role of ARUA as a network of public universities that supports the transformation of Africa by means of research and innovation.

The plan will align ARUA’s current initiatives with its core vision of significantly expanding and enhancing the quality of research done in Africa by African researchers to consolidate the gains made since its inception.

The strategy has four pillars: enhanced research (see table), expanded and improved graduate training and support, strengthening institutional capability for research management and research advocacy.

*Planned interventions for enhancing research*

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Objectives	Planned Action and Activities
1. Institutionalise the ARUA model of CoE into self-sustaining and capacity building research clusters	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Establish and support additional CoEs hosted by selected African universities over the next five years</li> <li>Develop new areas of collaborative research to tackle pandemics, such as vaccine development research</li> </ul>
2. Increase the scale, scope and quality of inter-disciplinary collaborative research among African universities	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Generate several large inter-disciplinary collaborative research projects at each CoE in support of SDGs</li> </ul>
3. Develop research capacity through an ARUA model of Early-Career and Post-Doctoral fellowships through collaborative research	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Support each CoE to develop structures for Early-Career and Post-Doctoral Fellowships focusing on collaborative research and mentorship</li> </ul>
4. Enhance significantly the research infrastructure of member universities and research clusters and its use	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Seek international and national funding to support infrastructure development</li> <li>Enable and catalyse access to sources of funding for infrastructure development.</li> <li>Explore the establishment of an ARUA Infrastructure Fund.</li> <li>Invest significantly in the research infrastructure of member universities.</li> <li>Significantly improve the quality of infrastructure based on comparative advantage</li> </ul>
5. Foster increased external collaborative engagements with university networks in the Global North following the principle of equitable partnerships	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Seek like-minded partners in Europe, North America and other regions</li> <li>Minimise or eliminate barriers to mobility for academics and post-docs</li> </ul>

### Strategic objectives

Under the broad aim of improving graduate training, ARUA wants universities to have a minimum of 75% instead of 45% PhD holders as academic staff over a 10-year period to help in the development of good quality PhD graduates for other African universities.

“ARUA member universities produce an average of 200 PhDs in a year, thus leading to a total of about 3,200. It is proposed to double this number over the five-year plan following several supportive interventions at ARUA member universities,” the plan states.

ARUA also wants to work towards placing 10 African, up from one, universities among the global 200 institutions.

Other strategic objectives include developing strong links between its member research universities, industry and other productive sectors to become a strong and effective advocate for funding research in Africa by national governments and international agencies.

It is anticipated that this plan will place ARUA in a stronger position to attract funding from international organisations to complement the limited resources being provided by member universities. It is also expected that the plan will encourage a few other capable and like-minded African universities to want to join the network.

“This initiative comes with the understanding that more than 95% of the generation of such knowledge in the region has been done or led by public universities, and that they are likely to remain in that unique position in the foreseeable future,” the document said, adding that, “the development challenges that confront most nations in the region are beginning to manifest themselves as having a transnational nature.”

### Research focus areas

It said that, beyond the pandemic, problems with climate change, water, energy, unemployment, migration, poverty, governance and conflict are all significantly transnational, and require answers that go beyond national boundaries, require interventions that are derived collaboratively, and are not available from national technology and innovation institutions, including universities.

“Most leading African universities struggle to diversify away from the traditional role of producing human resources to manage mainly public institutions. This pressure on them, often imposed by the state,

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obliges universities to focus primarily on undergraduate training with very limited public resources,” the document said.

It said that, when the universities seek to change the status quo, they have difficulty making the transition to becoming research-intensive institutions that emphasise more costly graduate education.

“In many countries, universities are further confronted with exogenous pressures emanating from the political, economic and social environments that seek to transform them into state instruments for pursuing an undefined development agenda,” it added.

### **Growing the number of Centres of Excellence**

The document mentioned inadequate or poor facilities or infrastructure, inadequate or poor equipment and inadequate or poor human resources associated with ageing as well as the brain drain, adding that there are very few opportunities for capacity-building and retention and limited opportunities for research grants.

In addition, poor governance in many public universities has resulted in most African universities not adequately producing the knowledge that would provide answers to national challenges and make them globally competitive.

It said that, while some attempts have been made to change this narrative and transform African universities into research-intensive institutions of learning, the reliance on limited state funding has seriously constrained their objectives, so a new strategy is required.

“An integral part of the strategy will involve institutions working collaboratively toward a shared vision. ARUA will mobilise resources to establish additional research clusters or Centres of Excellence across Africa at both ARUA and non-ARUA universities based on the ARUA model in the medium to long term,” it said.

As a performance indicator, the target of 27 centres in five years is mentioned in the document. There are currently 13 Centres of Excellence based at ARUA member universities, which are seen as key in advancing research.

In an effort to provide solutions, ARUA and the Guild of European Research-intensive Universities (the Guild) issued a call for the development of research clusters in July 2020, the document said, adding that this has led to large-scale interdisciplinary research collaborations among African researchers with the effort directed at addressing the myriad common challenges faced across the continent.

“ARUA has, with the support of various partners, initiated the establishment of three Vaccine Development Research and Capacity Building Hubs in Western, Eastern and Southern Africa,” the document said, adding that, the “the initiative was undertaken to give additional meaning to the collaborative research effort.

“Through the initiative, research knowledge and expertise in vaccine research is expected to be shared among researchers across the network.”



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