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Testing BRCK's Digital Education in Northern Kenya

(The Lack) of African ICT Research

 DECEMBER 15, 2010   HASH

I'm at the ICTD conference at Royal Holloway, University of London, this week. Usually I wouldn't be at a conference full of academics and researchers, but Tim Unwin (conference Chair), was interested in having a practitioner panel leading it off, of which I was a part. It's a conference of very intelligent and driven people, with a lot more patience than myself, studying a lot of what's going on in the ICT space as it relates to development in Africa, Asia and South America.

More Research in/of Africa, by Africans and African Institutions

One of the people that I've been speaking a lot with here is Shikoh Gitau (on Twitter), a Kenyan lady who has spent the last few years down at the University of Cape Town doing research. In the talk about "ICTD Research by Africans: Origins, Interests, and Impact" by Gitau S; Plattiga, P and K.Diga, there were some

very interesting points given and a great argument made for why Africans need to be involved more.

ICTD Research by Africans: Origins, Interests, and Impact

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> *"African research agendas need to involve Africans more"*
> *– Geoff Walsham*

It's no surprise that most of the ICT research comes from South Africa, followed by Nigeria and Botswana. But even if you added up all the research done in all of Africa, it is only 9% of the research done in Africa is done by African institutions.

Who are the researchers in Africa?

This, of course, is what Shikoh and her team looked into. Here's where you can help to. What are the African ICT research institutions? What are the publications?

- University of Cape Town
- Research ICT Africa
- The African Journal of Information and Communication

- **Microsoft Research**, particularly Jonathan Donner in Cape Town
- **Nokia Research in Kenya**

Add any ones that you know to the comments below and I'll add them to the list above.

Thoughts on Doing More

One of my questions about why there isn't more African ICT research was whether this was a supply and demand problem. Is it because there aren't enough researchers in Africa? Not enough research institutions? Or, is it because the people paying for and funding research are only funding researchers in their own back yard (the US and Europe)?

Part of the answer seems to lie in the lack of incentives for African academics to get away from "just" lecturing and into research. Another seems to be the lack of funding organizations looking for Africans to do the actual research.

I'm intrigued enough by this that I'm thinking of how the iHub can be used to support African researchers. If that interests you, let me know.
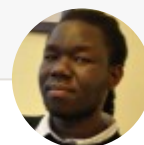
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18 thoughts on "(The Lack) of African ICT Research"

muloem

I have studied and worked in a university in Uganda and what I noticed is that the structure and focus of the universities is not tailored towards research. My experience in European universities has been that lecturers / professors have a group of assistants who help handle the "mundane" issues of the lecturing – grading, admin issues – with classes, while other assistants are dedicated to research. In the university in which I worked, the lecturer handled everything from the classroom instruction to the mundane. Doing this for 3 classes meant that it is *impossible* to have any time for research that makes any sense. I think until this setup is restructured and the focus moves away from teaching universities, you shall not see too many African researchers.

 DECEMBER 15, 2010 AT 12:30 PM

Mkono

@Hash,
I believe we have plenty of people who have done plenty of theoretical work in Africa. Governments in Africa are generally too poor given say most of Africa's East Africa budget is 50% aid. I believe research institutions should more of private en devours and should driven by the Telecommunication and other IT companies making money hand over fist. Certainly government can help and must help to shepherd investments and resources into R&D.

This R&D can be channeled via Universities and get students tinker in the lab. African Universities must know that they can not just be the receiving end free Microsoft Office apps and call themselves teaching Computer Sciences.. there are exceptions and I know brilliant students who have graduated from

several Universities who can go toe-toe with any one however it was mostly their effort sadly the Universities are becoming commercial dumping ground.

I believe countries such Rwanda are ahead of the pack and are fostering investments and purposely built ICT parks. iHub is creating a big buzz around Africa and even if you don't know it yet is being watched to be replicated and YES that is what we want.

📅 DECEMBER 15, 2010 AT 4:06 PM

Rob

The Meraka Institute (http://www.meraka.org.za/) that is part of the CSIR in South Africa does some excellent applied research on ICT. I've also heard about work that Makerere University (http://mak.ac.ug/) in Uganda has done (with IDRC I think) some interesting research into use of mobile devices.

📅 DECEMBER 15, 2010 AT 4:29 PM

Mary Muiruri

There are some very good ICT scholars in African countries who have carried out and implemented results of excellent research. The main challenge is funding.

Generally speaking ICT research doesn't receive good funding levels and yet most of the jobs in

Africa will eventually be created in the ICT sector because the traditional manufacturing and agriculture sector have not coped with the high unemployment rates.

India has always fascinated me as a researcher. The country has high population, high poverty rates, many challenges and yet that has not stopped the country from implementing ambitious, well researched ICT solutions that have continued to created employment for the youth. In addition, the Indian youth has been able to penetrate most economies because of superior ICT skills.

The most common question African researchers get is "rice, computers, or research?" Donors have their own priorities and so do African governments. I cannot agree more with you on the need for more researchers but for this to happen, there's urgent need to put the necessary structures and mechanisms to support the research, and more important implementation of the research findings. implementing

📅 DECEMBER 15, 2010 AT 7:39 PM

John Karanja

I think fundamentally Africans are net consumers of ICT products and therefore there is no incentive to apply already scarce resources to research.

Until we begin producing in ICT then we will see very little research.

We already see a lot of informal research based (trial and error) innovation in Kenya and once some of this organizations become successful companies

then we will see partnerships with Universities and possibly Government.

In my experience in Europe Research efforts are mostly Top Down Driven funded by large Corporations or Charters.

📅 DECEMBER 17, 2010 AT 8:11 AM

Rosemary

My work is not in ICT, however I have found the absence of African generated research. In Nigeria, for instance, research is generally seen as a waste of time and effort. A very very small number of projects/solutions – academic, government or businesses – are based on in genuine research. There is a greater focus on imitation/plagiarism.

Other challenges in Nigeria include the reluctance to share information, and cooked up data (particularly in universities).

So, I would think that a good place to start would be to educate Africans on the value of research, to hold workshops to teach the skills required and to provide an online platform to curate the research. Maybe then the West will take notice and begin to engage home-based researchers.

📅 DECEMBER 17, 2010 AT 3:27 PM

Dan Orwa

Thank you starting this conversations about research in Africa more so in institutions of higher learning in by Africans. Whereas there it is true there is little visibility, it is not necessarily true that there is little research. However due to inadequate dissemination channels, many of the research work go un-noticed. For example, at the university of Nairobi, specifically within the College of biological and Physical Sciences where I belong, lot of research is being carried out by colleagues and so the notion that most academicians spend time lecturing is not entirely accurate. Secondly some of the research work being undertaken are contracted in which case the results are subject to NDAs making it difficult to quantify such.

There is however need to empower researchers through re-establishment of funding opportunities such as the Dean's committees, establishment of local peer-reviewed journals targeting specific research areas and encouraging partnerships between industry and academia to undertake productive research.

 DECEMBER 17, 2010 AT 4:03 PM

D. Mwesigye Gumisiriza

Check out the Faculty of Computing and IT at Makerere University, http://www.cit.ac.ug or http://www.mak.ac.ug they have done some ICT research. There have been annual conferences to disseminate and discuss these researches. Admittedly, there is still a lot to be done in that by African institutions

 DECEMBER 19, 2010 AT 11:18 PM

First body

The presentation highlights the shortcomings of ICT research in Africa being quantity and quality of published papers. Research is a double edged sword with the ability to find the best way to tackle a problem and on the other hand it can lead to implementation paralysis if the data is conflicting and not definitive. Another reason for implementation paralysis is research groups with different school of thoughts all chasing for limited funding funding and publishing conflicting information.
The ICT sector requires more funds and in my opinion academic research should not take precedence to training and implementing projects which leads to learning in a trial and error method.

📅 DECEMBER 20, 2010 AT 7:33 AM

Mary Muiruri

Collaboration on International ICT Policy For East and Southern Africa (CIPESA) http://www.cipesa.org in Uganda has carried out several research projects.

Afrika ICT Strategies (AIS) http://www.afrikaict.com has also carried out and implemented several research projects. Some have been published by University of Maryland http://www.cidcm.umd.edu. Other results have been implemented through

enaction of e-Legislation policies for Kenya, Uganda, Tanzania, Rwanda, Burundi, Madagascar, Zambia, Liberia and Sierra Leone.

Currently AIS is conducting research on decentralization of e-Government services in Kenya with a focus on closing the digital divide between the haves in capital/urban areas and the have nots in the secondary/rural areas. We're looking at best practices in South Africa, Egypt, India, Brazil, Philippines and Mexico

📅 DECEMBER 21, 2010 AT 4:37 AM

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Joseph Budu

for want of more time, i just want to say that there is some research from Ghana too. you can read Dr. Richard Boateng's profile from the above-stated website. i'll get in touch properly soon
thank you though

📅 DECEMBER 22, 2010 AT 2:33 PM

JScarantino

Thanks for bringing this to light Erik. I believe research is one of the most underrated issues of African education, and its biggest weakness. Brain-drain of Africa is a testament to a lack of research

opportunities and funding, yet you rarely hear anyone speak of research in Africa by Africans. As the other commenter's have noted, the lack of research is a result of many problems combined. It is both a funding issue as well as a perception issue. What college grad wants to spend time doing research when a company is willing to pay top dollar for their time? Until some sort of incentive is built into research, it will always maintain a low priority.

It would be great to see the iHub play a role in promoting research, particularly of new graduates out of colleges and universities.

📅 DECEMBER 22, 2010 AT 4:34 PM

Florian Sturm

Here an interview we held with Paul Plantinga, co-author of the paper:

📅 DECEMBER 23, 2010 AT 6:27 AM

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Ken Miruka

Indeed research is still much unexploited in Africa. Perhaps the most visible form of research is in the form of academic projects in IT. These projects, done by students for academic purposes, often end up as great innovations which, sadly, are not furthered as soon as the objective of earning a degree is met. With little financing and marketing strategies, potential research work often go unnoticed.

What is observable, however, is that most research work in Africa is done for the benefit of foreign governments and companies who have the finances to support such work. African governments and universities can do better by forming more research partnerships to pull resources together for large-scale research projects. They could also capitalize on the available pool of upcoming researchers by creating research departments in every school. In this case finances will be of less limitation since "Necessity is the mother of invention"

MARCH 21, 2011 AT 5:32 AM

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