Utilisation of South African Research on Higher Education

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EDITORS

Acronyms

AAIR	Australasian Association for Institutional Research
AEHE	Assessment and Evaluation in Higher Education
AIR	Association for Institutional Research
AJPHERD	African Journal for Physical, Health Education, Recreation and Dance
AJPHEs	African Journal for Physical Activity and Health Sciences
AOSIS	African Online Scientific Information Systems
ASAUDIT	Association of South African University Directors of Information Technology
ASSAf	The Academy of Science of South Africa
BRICS	Brazil, Russia, India, China, South Africa
CAGR	Compound Annual Growth Rate
CAMPROSA	Campus Protection Society South Africa
CHE	Council on Higher Education
CHELSA	Committee for Directors of Higher Education Libraries in South Africa
CIRPA	Canadian Institutional Research and Planning Association
China AIR	China Association for Institutional Research
CPUT	Cape Peninsula University of Technology
CREST	Centre for Research on Evaluation, Science and Technology
COP	Community of Practice
CSI	Corporate Social Investment
CUT	Central University of Technology
DfID	Department for International Development
DHET	Department of Higher Education and Training
DHSS	British Department of Health and Social Security
DIA	Department for Institutional Advancement
DoE	Department of Education
DoL	Department of Labour
DSI	Department of Science and Innovation
DST	Department of Science and Technology
DUT	Durban University of Technology
DVC	Deputy Vice-Chancellor
EACEA	European Education and Culture Executive Agency
EAIR	European Association for Institutional Research
ECHEA	Eastern Cape Higher Education Association
EU	European Union
HE	Higher Education
HEDA	Higher Education Data Analytics
HEDSA	Higher and Further Education Disability Services Association
HEIR	UK & Ireland Higher Education Institutional Research Network
HEIs	Higher Education Institutions
HELTASA	Higher Education Learning and Teaching Association of Southern Africa
HEMIS	Higher Education Management Information System
HEMP	Higher Education Management & Policy

HEP	Higher Education Policy
HER	Higher Education Research
HERD	Higher Education Research & Development
HERDSA	Higher Education Research and Development Society of Australasia
HESA	Higher Education South Africa
HEQ	Higher Education Quarterly
HEQC	Higher Education Quality Committee
HEQF	Higher Education Qualifications Framework
HOD	Head of Department
ICCT	Information Communication and Computer Technology
ICT	Information and Communications Technology
IEASA	International Education Association of South Africa
IHE	Innovative Higher Education
IJAD	International Journal for Academic Development
IBSS	International Bibliography of the Social Sciences
IPMS	Institutional Planning and Management Support
IPU	Intellectual Property Unit
IR	Institutional Research
JCSD	Journal of College Student Development
JES	Journal of Educational Studies
JHE	Journal of Higher Education
JHEPM	Journal of Higher Education Policy and Management
KPIs	Key Performance Indicators
LA	Learning Analytics
LDA	Latent Dirichlet Allocation
LDP	Leadership Development Programme
LSSE	Lecturer Evaluation of Student Engagement
M&E	Monitoring and Evaluation
MENA-AIR	Middle East and North Africa Association for Institutional Research
MIS	Management Information Support
MoU	Memorandum of Understanding
MTSF	Medium-Term Strategic Framework
NCHE	National Commission for Higher Education
NDP	National Development Plan
nGAP	New Generation of Academic Personnel
NGO	Non-Governmental Organisation
NMU	Nelson Mandela University
Norw	Norwegian Register for Scientific Journals, Series and Publishers
NPHE	National Plan on Higher Education
NPM	New Public Management
NPPSET	National Plan for Post-School Education and Training
NRF	National Research Foundation
NSC	National Senior Certificate
NSFAS	National Student Financial Aid Scheme
NSI	National System of Innovation
NUFFIC	Netherlands Universities Foundation for International Cooperation

NWU	Northwest University
MEC	Management Executive Committee
MTA	Material Transfer Agreement
MUT	Mangosuthu University of Technology
OECD	Organisation for Economic Cooperation and Development
ODL	Open Distance Learning
ORD	Office of Research and Development
PSET	Post School Education and Training
QA	Quality Assurance
QAA	Quality Assurance and Accreditation
QEP	Quality Enhancement Project
ResHE	Research in Higher Education
RevHE	Review of Higher Education
RHE	Research on Higher Education
RSA	Republic of South Africa
RU	Rhodes University
SAAIR	Southern African Association for Institutional Research
SAACDHE	Southern African Association for Counselling and Development in Higher Education
SAACHS	South African Association of Campus Health Services
SAASSAP	South African Association of Senior Student Affairs Professionals
SABINET	Southern African Bibliographic Information Network
SADC	Southern African Development Community
SAFMA	South African Facilities Management Association
SAHECEF	South African Higher Education Community Engagement Forum
SAIA	South African Institute for Advancement
SAJHE	South African Journal of Higher Education
SAK	South African Knowledgebase
SAMJ	South African Medical Journal
SAPSE	South African Post-Secondary Education
SARHE	South African Research on Higher Education
SARIMA	Southern African Research and Innovation Management Association
SASSE	South African Survey of Student Engagement
SAQA	South African Qualifications Authority
SciELO	Scientific Electronic Library Online
SciSTIP	DSI/NRF Centre of Excellence in Scientometrics and Science, Technology and Innovation Policy
SDGs	Sustainable Development Goals
SEAAIR	Southeast Asian Association for Institutional Research
SHE	Studies in Higher Education
SIAMPI	Social Impact Assessment Methods for research and funding instruments through the study of Productive Interactions
SMU	Sefako Makgatho Health Sciences University
SPU	Sol Plaatje University
SSS	Student Support Services
SU	Stellenbosch University

TAIR	Taiwan Association for Institutional Research
TEAM	Tertiary Education and Management
THE	Teaching in Higher Education
TLAD	Teaching, Learning and Academic Development
TUT	Tshwane University of Technology
UB	University of Botswana
UCDG	University Capacity Development Grants
UKZN	University of Kwazulu-Natal
UNESCO	United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization
Unisa	University of South Africa
UCT	University of Cape Town
UFH	University of Fort Hare
UFS	University of the Free State
UJ	University of Johannesburg
UL	University of Limpopo
UMP	University of Mpumalanga
UoT	University of Technology
UN	United Nations
UniVen	University of Venda
UniZulu	University of Zululand
UP	University of Pretoria
USAf	Universities South Africa
USSA	University Sport South Africa
UWC	University of the Western Cape
VC	Vice-Chancellor
VUT	Vaal University of Technology
Wits	University of the Witwatersrand
WoS	Web of Science
WPPSET	White Paper for Post-School Education and Training
WSU	Walter Sisulu University

Utilisation of South African research on higher education: Looking ahead 11

Jan Botha and Gabriele Vilyte¹

There is a real need to widen the scope of our thinking about the relation between research, policy, and practice, so as to make sure that the discussion is no longer restricted to finding the most effective ways to achieve certain ends but also addresses questions about the desirability of the ends themselves (Biesta, 2007:21)²

The guiding question for the research that resulted in the publication of this book is, “What do we know about the utilisation of South African research on higher education (SARHE) and its subset of research known as institutional research (IR)?” For an IR practitioner the question may be asked in a narrower way: “What types of data are being used by whom and to what effect?” For the scholar engaged in research on higher education (RHE), the question may be phrased differently to include not only the use of data (the ‘facts and figures’ regarding some aspect of higher education) but also the use of the theoretical insights, the ideas and ideals for higher education and the recommendations made in published scholarly work. Given that higher education is of broad societal and political interest, a systematic study of the utilisation of RHE (including IR) is justified even though a definitive answer to the question may well remain perennially elusive. This book is a first attempt to investigate this question in a systematic manner and to specifically bring it to bear upon the South African situation.

To cover the breadth of the question, the authors of the book looked at various dimensions and themes of RHE, gathered empirical data from influential national institutions in the higher education sector as well as a number of higher education institutions (HEIs), and employed both quantitative and qualitative methods for the analysis and interpretation of the data. The chapters in this book outline the contours of the body of SARHE and IR and uncover the mechanisms that determine its nature and the uptake, use and impact of these

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2 Biesta, G. (2007). ‘Why “What Works” Won’t Work: Evidence-Based Practice and Democratic Deficit in Educational Research’. *Educational Theory*, 57(1):1-22.

outputs in the higher education community and beyond. Below we summarise the key findings from the chapters in the book, followed by a reflection on what HE practitioners, researchers and users can do, looking ahead, to enhance the uptake, use and societal impact of their research.

In Chapter 1, the authors presented a historical overview of the development of RHE and its IR subset, as well as an overview of the developments in scholarly work on research utilisation in general. The relationships and interactions between researchers and their potential users are a complex and multifaceted phenomenon. The authors propose a framework of how the relationships between research, policy, and practice can be visualised in the context of higher education.

As a prelude to the thematic studies in the second part of the book (Chapters 5-10) that are specifically addressing the issue of research utilisation, three bibliometric studies are included. The aim of these three chapters is to identify and describe the body of research at issue. In order to answer the overarching question on the utilisation of SARHE, one first needs to outline the size and nature of this body of research.

In Chapter 2, a bibliometric study, the authors set out to identify and describe the body of RHE produced by researchers and practitioners affiliated with South African public universities during the period 2005-2015. The study findings suggest that during this period, SARHE authorships increased more than three-fold and the researchers in this field have become progressively more diverse in gender, racial and institutional representation. SARHE is clearly a vibrant endeavour in which many productive researchers participate. The authors reported that there was an increase in output types other than the journal article, with book chapters, monographs and published conference proceedings increasingly becoming the preferred types of output. The authors also presented a list of the most productive SARHE authors and the most popular SARHE journals. They found that SARHE outputs are of varying quality and primarily relegated to local and regional journals. Alarming, the study also found that a tenth of the identified SARHE outputs were published in potentially predatory journals.

Chapter 3 continued the investigation into the nature of SARHE, mapping out the most prominent topics or themes of this body of research using the rigorous quantitative methodology of topic modelling. Using this innovative approach and methodology, the authors identified 17 topics in this field of studies in South Africa:

1. Knowledge and the curriculum in a changing social context
2. Values, citizenship
3. Learning and teaching
4. Academic literacy in a multi-lingual context
5. ICT and access to the learning environment
6. Student assessment
7. Student success
8. Skills training for the world of work
9. Health professions education

10. Teacher education
11. Research production, postgraduate education
12. Community engagement
13. Academic profession
14. Student health and well-being
15. Governance and management
16. Transformation
17. Economic dimensions of higher education, globalisation.

In Chapter 4, the authors reported the results of a systematic review of research on women staff at South African HEIs published between 2006-2018. The study found that research outputs on this topic have increased since 2006, especially during the period of 2013-2017. These outputs were most often in the form of qualitative studies; most often published in the South African Journal of Higher Education; and usually produced by researchers working in departments in the human sciences. The study found that research on this topic appears to be highly feminised: women were responsible for more than 80% of these authorships. The findings further showed that the three most prolific institutions responsible for research output on this topic were Vaal University of Technology (VUT), the University of Limpopo (UL) and the University of Zululand (UNIZULU). In the last part of the chapter, a content analysis of themes covered in this set of publications is presented. The dominant issues addressed in these publications are institutional transformation, family-related issues and recognition.

The five chapters in the second part of the book are based on empirical data gathered at eleven universities and two national agencies (the CHE and the DHET) specifically for this book and address a variety of topics, using different conceptualisations of research utilisation that are applied to diverse institutional contexts.

In Chapter 5, the authors posed the question: “What influences the legitimacy of IR and its subsequent use?” Based on the analysis of the data gathered at seven different traditional universities, the authors demonstrated how the following four aspects can catalyse research utilisation:

- compliance reporting,
- the perceived trustworthiness of the data,
- the choice of approaches to institutional reporting, and
- the IR units’ proximity to university leadership.

The authors further suggested that research utilisation can be enhanced by

- raising awareness through decision-support,
- shifting mind-sets through enhanced communication and collaborative efforts, and
- demonstrating public accountability via compliance reporting

Lastly, the authors argued that IR is still primarily used symbolically and conceptually and is mainly legitimated through bureaucratic systems such as compliance with data quality standards and reporting regulations.

Chapter 6 probed the use of research evidence in South African national higher education policy-making processes. The authors demonstrated how evidence can play a role in all the stages of the complex national policy cycle. Using the cases of the reports of the De Lange Commission (in 1981) and the National Commission on Higher Education (in 1998), as well as the initiatives on funding policy reform (during 2015-2016) and the reform of the undergraduate curriculum (during 2012-2013), the authors illustrated how crucial the factors of politics, timing, pragmatism and consensus building in national policy-making are for the uptake of research initiatives to be successful.

In Chapter 7, the authors reported on their investigation of research use and impact of IR outputs focusing on student success. They suggested that it is not enough for IR practitioners to only produce research reports, they must also play a role to facilitate and enhance the uptake and use of their research outputs. Two important observations from the findings are that, for research to be taken up in institutions, there should be sufficient capacity at organisational level to produce high quality research outputs and an institutional environment conducive to the use of research evidence. With the term 'capacity at organisational level', the authors refer to the knowledge and skills of the IR practitioners that enable them to produce sound research and actionable findings. With the term 'organisational environment and enabling action', they refer to the necessity to align the research with the strategic goals of the institution, the necessity to have the buy-in of the executive management and the necessity of collaboration between interconnected support services.

Chapter 8 delved into the experiences of IR practitioners regarding the uptake of their outputs at a South African comprehensive university. The authors demonstrated that where IR outputs were taken up, four factors played a key role in determining the focus of these IR activities:

- corporate agents (such as the executive management and committees),
- external factors and developments (such as political pressure),
- effective dissemination structures, and
- adequate resourcing and capacity.

The research reported in Chapter 9 was guided by the question: "Who determines the research agenda for RHE?" The authors suggested that there are several co-existing demands, discursive orientations and needs to which higher education research efforts attempt to respond. According to the authors, researchers increasingly face competing demands, not only from within HEIs, but also from outside their institutions. Other layers of competing demands arise amid funding constraints, demands from stakeholders (governments, students, ranking systems) and the need to find funding through commercialising research initiatives or through the solicitation of funding grants.

Using the Social Impact Assessment Methods through Productive Interactions (SIAMPI) approach and thematic analysis, the authors of Chapter 10 presented a typology of characteristics of productive interactions in the context of RHE and IR at two universities in the Eastern Cape province. The findings suggest that the identified productive interactions had to meet a number of pre-conditions for research uptake, namely:

- collaboration with and among researchers and stakeholders,
- the researcher(s) and practitioner(s) must have a good reputation and acknowledged expertise,
- the research has to be needs-driven,
- conducive research and work environments, and
- the generation and production of routine reports and effective dissemination efforts.

As we look ahead, based on the findings reported in this book, what implications for the utilisation of the outputs of scholars and practitioners in higher education can be distilled?

The first observation suggested by the evidence is that the situation is not as dire as it sometimes seems to be when scholars and practitioners in higher education bemoan their perceived predicament: ‘nobody uses our work/nothing happens to our reports, they simply sit on the shelves’. On the contrary, much empirical evidence in this book suggests that many stakeholders in the higher education community and beyond do, in fact, take up this research and use it. It will therefore serve scholars and practitioners well to be informed about the mechanisms, dynamics and processes of research utilisation. That in itself can be inspiring and enriching, and even more so in the context of South African higher education, which is confronted by so many deep and complex issues, not least about the very purposes and goals of higher education itself.

It will serve RHE scholars and IR practitioners well to think in a more integrated manner about their efforts and contributions towards a better understanding of higher education and how that understanding can be used in the service of higher education. On the one hand, there is a need for IR work to be informed by scholarly publications in RHE, to be enriched by theory, and for IR practitioners to continuously develop a research mindset as well as a strategic one (in addition to the service ethic for which IR practitioners are known and appreciated for), and to build on and move beyond compliance reporting. On the other hand, there is a need for RHE scholars to demonstrate a practical mind in their work, an openness to interrogate and enhance the actionability of their research, to engage with the outputs of their IR colleagues, and to bring theory to bear onto practice.

Practitioners and scholars in higher education will do well to design, execute and disseminate their research with optimal utilisation in mind, guided by the insight that this is not a linear process. This is similar to a sound curriculum or project design process: to begin with the end (the outcomes and possible impact) in mind and to work back deciding on the appropriate activities that can lead to the desired outcomes (and impact). Of course, it remains crucially important for scholars and practitioners to be alerted to the issues related to ‘who sets the agenda’ for RHE (including IR) and to balance the demands and expectations of a wide range of stakeholders. However, enhancing utilisation entails more than just ‘getting the stakeholders on board’ at the beginning of the research process when the agenda is being set. Scholars and practitioners are increasingly expected to take proactive initiatives to enhance the uptake, use and impact of their outputs.

Insight into the dynamics and processes related to the utilisation of RHE (including IR) not only relate to the conceptions, activities and ideals of RHE scholars and IR practitioners. An implication of the non-linear nature of research utilisation is the need for other stakeholders in higher education, such as the policy-makers and decision makers at different levels

within higher education institutions as well as the authorities in the higher education system and beyond, to reconsider their interaction with the producers of RHE (including IR). Collaboration has emerged every time as a key concern in the studies reported in this book – this holds true for collaboration among the producers of RHE as well as collaboration between the producers and potential users of RHE (including IR). Collaboration is a *sine qua non* for research utilisation during the multi-directional processes to find and implement good solutions for the many issues facing higher education in South Africa.

Finally, an investigation of research utilisation goes deeper than an attempt to gain better insight into the mechanics and dynamics of the processes that may enhance the uptake, use and impact of research. The question about the ‘how’ of utilisation (the means) needs to be accompanied by the *what for* question (the ends): what is South African research on higher education used for? The desirability of the ends themselves is an ongoing and pressing concern for the scholars, practitioners and users alike. The aim of this book was not to address this *what for* question. However, we maintain that the effort in this book to address the (more humble) preliminary question provides a fundamental building block for further research on this deeper and more fundamental question.