



POLICY BRIEF FOR UNIVERSITIES IN HIGH-INCOME COUNTRIES

Achieving equity in global health research will involve sacrifices:

Creating sustainable research in global mental health in low and middle-income countries

The problem: Despite considerable international investment in building research capacity in low and middle-income countries (LMIC) in mental health, we identified that there are few pathways for attaining long-term research careers in these settings largely because of lack of research infrastructure and funding to LMIC institutions.

Our ask: We call on universities in high-income countries (HICs) to support LMIC researchers to take leadership roles on all grants and publications, which will involve a fundamental shift in how HIC universities promote and incentivize researchers who work in LMICs. These efforts should be part of university efforts to be anti-racist, anti-colonialist, and support the Black Lives Matter movement.

Background:

- The past decade has seen an increase in global mental health research funding, focused on developing interventions in LMICs.
- In Africa, this funding has also supported capacity-building for early career researchers, funding the development of an MPhil programs in public mental health; numerous PhDs, MPhil, and post-doctorate fellowships; and expanded clinical teaching capacity in academic psychiatry departments.
- As a result of these capacity-building interventions, there are many early career African researchers with training and experience in global mental health.

Our study:

- Aim: Explore the career pathways and the funding environment for early career mental health researchers from Ethiopia, Malawi, South Africa, and Zimbabwe

- Methods: We conducted qualitative interviews with 52 early career researchers, policymakers, service users, and academics from the four countries and representatives from international funding agencies that support global mental health research.
- Results:
 - Early career researchers want to continue working in mental health research, but while there are select examples of successful researchers, most early career researchers see no clear path for developing a research career. They are often pulled into clinical or teaching roles.
 - Academics recognized that their universities do not have the capacity or administrative staff to support administration and writing of large grants.
 - Funders described efforts to develop the capacity of LMIC institutions in grant writing and management, and few indicated that they gave grants directly to these institutions, but most gave grants to HIC universities, placing them in charge of grant management.

See publication: Langhaug, Lisa, et al. "["We need more big trees as well as the grass roots': Going beyond research capacity building to develop sustainable careers in mental health research in African countries."](#) *International Journal of Mental Health Systems* 14:66 (2020).

Recommendations:

HIC universities have a central role to play in shifting the center of power in global mental health research.

1. In order to build up grant management and institutional capacity at LMIC universities, grants should be administrated by LMICs, with support from HIC university grant management offices if needed. This will result in less funding for HIC institutional overhead, but will allow LMIC institutions to develop infrastructure and grants management capacity and helps address global inequalities.
2. Departments should develop a specific policy to reward HIC investigators for publications in which they play a supporting, mentoring role, but are neither first nor senior author. This more "behind the scenes" role should be recognized in decisions regarding promotion.
3. HIC universities should continue to participate in mental health research capacity-building and mental health research in LMICs, as this work is vital to further develop mental health research in Africa. These efforts should not only focus on training and degrees, but on creating pathways to long-term careers and building up institutions that can support researchers.

Representative quotes

“Obviously, [my organisation] is accountable to this country’s taxpayer, and we, have huge reporting requirements... so it’s kind of a cyclical problem, because when you’ve received lots [of grants], then you have the experience of reporting and know what donors want.” – International research funder

“I think that anybody who does research in a low- and middle-income country has responsibility. ...We attach research capacity-building to our research studies. But it’s not a substitute for the country com-mitting to building up its own research infrastructure.” – International research funder

“It’s amazing to see how they [a UK university] can pull together a team and bring in an extra consultant before you have even got the grant money to help put this huge grant together...”
– African early career researcher

About us

This study and policy brief were part of the African Mental Health Research Initiative (AMARI), a collaboration between four African universities (University of Addis Ababa, University of Cape Town, and University of Malawi College of Medicine, University of Zimbabwe College of Health Sciences) and King’s College London that aims to support the development of high-calibre MNS researchers who conduct research that meets the needs of the four host countries. AMARI recruited and is training 46 MNS research fellows at master’s, PhD and post-doctorate levels, with the intent of equipping them with the necessary research, teaching and leadership skills to build a viable and sustainable research network in the African region. With fees and stipend from AMARI, fellows enroll in a PhD or master’s program at an African university, then attend short courses on research methods, leadership, and academic writing that may not be available at their home institutions.

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