

Unlocking researchers' potential

Research shapes the dream at the University American College Skopje

I can still remember the first day at the University American College Skopje (UACS) as a research coordinator at that time. We set our goal to increase research and be 'teach and research' university, when all the others are 'teach only'. On top, the state has set aside only 0.2% of GDP for research and science as compared to the 3% at the European level, and favored the state universities. What a pity!

However, there was a guiding thought, a steering idea that helped me and my university benefit from the situation. When nobody else promotes and favors research, at least as much as teaching at universities, why don't we use that vacant field and be the first to make an inroad? So, the stiff road commenced by simple no-cost activities: disseminating information to the faculty for research opportunities, including conferences, publications and proposal calls. We started organizing a Research Monday, which is still operating as a research seminar series, whereby faculty presents its own research, their own experiences gained either through research or at a conference/seminar. We believed this would be an inspirational forum to stimulate a research-friendly atmosphere, a place where everybody gets informed on what the other does, exchanges ideas, proposes cooperation...

Slow but safe, we established our own budget for supporting the faculty for paper presentation at conferences and for publication in international peer-reviewed journals. At that time, it was only 1% of our university budget set aside for research promotion, but it appeared to be highly productive: people felt encouraged to apply for conferences and submit in journals: they overcome their 'fear' that their research is not worthy enough; they felt confident that they have what to say, their voice is relevant, their research may someday be beneficial for the society and improve our living standard...

Soon afterwards, I was promoted a Vice-Dean for Research. The management believed that the story that started some months earlier has its own value, a value that may bring us a considerable competitive advantage, when the other universities do not invest in research at all or invest only a little. This boost, coincidentally or not, happened along with two won projects for small-scale research. Small-scale, but even the longest trip starts with the first step, I believed. Moreover, at times, even the small-scale research may become a real promoter of ideas: frequently it requires an emphasized policy component, which may bring you to the forefront of the policy debate, where you really think that you are changing the world which surrounds you!

A real wind in the back was the discovery of WBC-INCO.NET. How come we did not know this before? A true hoard of information for conferences, journals, calls, cooperation... Fine, no time for regret – we will use this opportunity from now onwards: the portal will help the amplification and promotion of research we would like to make at our university, but we may also support the portal by being convinced that we contribute with a high-quality research! So, the story continued its adventure with quite intensified speed. Soon, we applied for two RRPP projects and one FP7 project. We got the positive response from all almost simultaneously. Our happiness was at the high. It was not only that we managed to secure funding for our ideas, but basically the recognition that we are really able to produce first-class research and be competitive at the European and even world level fuelled us.

In the meantime, let me not forget, the University Senate proposed that we elevate the research agenda even at a higher level: the University Research Committee has been established and I as a chairman, with the objective to steer the research work at the university level. As a Committee, we set

quite ambitious agenda, given our earlier success: the dissemination of research-related information must continue, the funding of conferences and publications must continue; the proposal preparation must go on; in addition, we have to establish contacts with universities and research centers from the region and abroad, since we can create synergies and become even stronger. I argued and I believe, WBC-INCO.NET has played a vital role in this endeavor. We even participated at a regional training in Tirana and a regional conference in Sarajevo, both steered and supported by the WBC-INCO project. And, I still loudly discuss at my university that the project is presently one of the major sources of our research energy.

Two years afterwards we are proud to have nearly 30% of our budget devoted to research from only 1% before. We are proud to have about one internationally published paper in a peer-reviewed journal listed in the Web of Science at every three members of the faculty, improving from over double lower two years before. Our research portfolio includes projects from the European Commission FP7, the Regional Research Promotion Program from the Swiss Development Agency, the World Bank, LSE Enterprise, Erasmus, the Global Development Network and so on (www.uacs.edu.mk/research). We are pleased to have recently signed the European Charter of Researchers, which will guide us to make our University even a better place to research in. And, last but not the least, we are presently strongly forcing the agenda for steering joint research with the industry and attracting, as associates, Macedonians who research abroad, as we believe these two pillars will give not only boost to our research, but will accelerate the recognition that the industry cooperation may give to our students, hence supporting their applied skills upgrade and, eventually, increase their probability of getting employed soon after their graduation. We believe these two pillars are presently also an un-ploughed field, similarly as we believed for the scientific research projects two years before.

Overall, our research aircraft presently flatters with the utmost power and I am proud that my faculty permanently fuels it with their ideas for projects, cooperation, networks... We are all proud that research shapes the dream at the University American College Skopje.

Our message to the Balkan researchers in particular is to unlock their hidden potential and consider the low level of research as an eternal opportunity and not a threat. Ideas need to be heard in the Balkans and even the smallest raised voice through research may be the biggest call for colleagues and policymakers to step in and may hence change our lives.

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