

UCL: A global partner for health research & innovation

Jane Kinghorn, along with Marta Ribeiro, Felipe Fouto, and Colby Benari from UCL, argues that the ability to listen and learn makes UCL a global partner of choice for health research & innovation

University College London (UCL) is rightly proud of its strap line “London’s Global University”. With more than 13,000 staff and 38,000 students from 150 different countries, it is one of the world’s leading multi-disciplinary and diverse universities. UCL operates in a global context and are committed to excellence, innovation and the promotion of global understanding in all its activities: research, teaching, learning, enterprise and community engagement.

Africa

UCL actively works with partners in many countries across the world; and in Africa, UCL is a key academic partner for the [Africa Health Research Institute \(AHRI\)](#), a multidisciplinary, independent research institute based across two sites in the province of KwaZulu-Natal, South Africa (SA). The goal of AHRI is to become a source of fundamental discoveries into the susceptibility, transmission and cure of HIV, Tuberculosis (TB) and related diseases. AHRI is highly collaborative and works with over 60 academic and clinical institutions across the continent and the world. This made it the perfect choice to partner with UCL’s [Translational Research Office \(TRO\)](#), [Research Coordination Office \(RCO\)](#) and [Academic Careers Office \(ACO\)](#) in applying for and successfully securing, a [UKRI Global Challenge Research Fund Impact Acceleration Award \(GCRF IAA\)](#).

GCRF IAA Funding

An aim of the GCRF IAA initiative is to

support cutting-edge research that addresses the challenges faced by developing countries in moving innovation into societal benefit. In 2019, the TRO and ACO organised two events in South Africa, aimed at promoting discussion and sharing knowledge of the challenges faced by innovators, entrepreneurs and businesses in developing products, therapies or interventions, taking into account the local and regional context. Both events were open to participants from across the African continent.

UCL Workshop in Translational Research, Health Innovation & Commercialization – Durban, SA 19-20th March 2019

The TRO, in partnership with AHRI and in collaboration with the [University of KwaZulu-Natal \(UKZN\)](#), organised a two-day Workshop in Translational Research, Health Innovation & Commercialization, which was hosted at the AHRI location in Durban. This two half-day Workshop was targeted at early stage researchers and/or innovators who work in the field of health and life sciences. The aim was to introduce participants to the concepts and tools available to plan the translational pathway of their research towards healthcare delivery and social impact, including discussion around the issues of intellectual property and downstream commercialisation and adoption.

A total of 63 people, both speakers and participants, attended the Workshop

with representation across six African countries (South Africa, Kenya, Uganda, Botswana, Ethiopia and Zimbabwe) and Europe. African participants had affiliations to AHRI, UKZN, [University of Cape Town \(UCT\)](#), the [Sub-Saharan African Network for TB/HIV Research Excellence \(SANTHE\)](#) and the [African Academy of Sciences \(AAS\)](#) amongst others. The event showcased many excellent talks by experienced speakers from a variety of backgrounds in research, innovation, regulation and policy-making and provided an opportunity for multidisciplinary networking and potential future collaborations in the field of health and life sciences. The full programme can be viewed [here](#).

One of the case studies highlighted was m-Africa, a two-year GCRF Global Infections Foundation Award that received funding from the Medical Research Council in April 2017. The aim of the m-Africa project has been to develop low-cost, user-friendly mobile phone-connected diagnostic tools for HIV and evaluate the feasibility of introducing these tools to improve access to HIV testing, as well as linkage to care, in KwaZulu-Natal, SA (please see video). The project is an interdisciplinary partnership between University College London, Imperial College London and the Africa Health Research Institute. m-Africa has also built on technologies developed by the [i-sense EPSRC Interdisciplinary Research Collaboration](#).

The feedback from the workshop was extremely positive: “Opened a window



of opportunity to make local and international collaboration, which is very important for research development and grant applications." "It provides a fantastic venue to establish intra-African and European-African networks focused on establishing and fostering translational research infrastructure and collaborations." "It gave researchers comprehensive insight into the technology transfer process and the reinforcement from the various organisations was great." "Educating and a pointer in the right direction for doing research and getting research support in South Africa." "The networking opportunity was excellent. The presentation of the TRO as a major resource was extremely valuable."

Ignite Medical Innovation Summit – Stellenbosch, SA 26th-27th March 2019

The ignite medical innovation summit, organised by the ACO in partnership with the Collaboration for the Advancement of Medical Innovation (CASMI), is an immersive and challenging experience that positions participants to drive change in medical innovation. By bringing together leaders in medical innovation to challenge each other, learn from other's sectors and develop new ways of thinking and working, they will change the future of medical innovation and accelerate progress.

The summit incorporated debate sessions that gave participants a 360-degree view of medical innovation in a discussion format. Further details about each session are available in the summit programme. Speakers from

organisation across Africa and beyond (South Africa, Kenya, Botswana, Madagascar and the UK) led the sessions with the full summit chaired by Professor Sir John Tooke (Chair of CASMI). Participants, also from organisations across Africa, addressed issues that arise when bringing innovations into a healthcare setting. Participants are actively encouraged to maintain the networks forged through the summit and to the wider Ignite Alumni. Some quotes from the summit included:

"Thank you very much for a really informative, thought-provoking meeting. Very well run, expertly chaired."

"It was a pleasure to participate and I look forward to keeping in touch and working with many of the fellow attendees going forward."

Future developments:

Both events highlighted a number of barriers to translation and knowledge exchange across the African continent many of which are shared in developed countries. The level of support for this activity across the continent varies greatly and is nicely articulated in a recent publication (Edwards et.al. Health Research Policy and Systems 2019): "Evidence map of knowledge translation strategies, outcomes, facilitators and barriers in African health systems" Edwards et.al Health Research Policy and Systems 2019 17:16). What we have heard from these debates and discussions is the absolute need to validate assumptions with end users in the field as well as working closely with the government's health policy agenda to invoke solutions into practice. We are now pursuing additional avenues to support innovators and institutes across Africa to further develop their translational support infrastructure tailored to their specific needs.

We wish to thank the UKRI GCRF IAA for providing the funding for the Ignite summit and the UCL Workshop in Translational Research. We would also like to thank our partners and collaborators at AHRI, UKZN and CASMI, for working with us and helping us to organise these events.

Additional authors:

Dr Marta Ribeiro, Senior Business & Innovation Manager, Translational Research Office, UCL

Mr Felipe Fouto, Programme Manager, Academic Careers Office, UCL

Ms Colby Benari, Head of the Academic Careers Office, UCL

Dr Jane Kinghorn, Director Translational Research Office, UCL



Jane Kinghorn

Director

Translational Research Office, UCL

Tel: +44 (0)207 679 8119

j.kinghorn@ucl.ac.uk

www.ucl.ac.uk/translational-research

www.twitter.com/ucltro