$2.4 Million Science Funding for Networks in Africa’s Universities

A new initiative to build scientific capacity in Africa has named its first three research and training networks following a competitive selection process.

The Regional Initiative in Science and Education (RISE) announced that grants worth US$2.4 Million will be awarded to each of three research networks to strengthen science teaching in sub-Saharan universities.

The three networks selected are:

- **The African Materials Science and Engineering Network (AMSEN),** led by Lesley Cornish of the University of Witwatersrand in South Africa, will focus on improving education in materials science to make fuller use of Africa’s vast mineral deposits. Other participating universities will be located in Botswana, Kenya, Namibia and Nigeria.

- **Southern African Biochemistry and Informatics for Natural Products (SABINA)** aims to improve food security, public health and exports by taking advantage of Africa’s natural biodiversity through advances in natural products science. Based at the University of Malawi under the direction of John Saka, the network will also include universities in Namibia, South Africa and Tanzania.

- **The Western Indian Ocean Regional Initiative in Marine Science and Education (WIO-RISE)** will use research and training to promote the sustainable development, utilization and protection of the coastal and marine environment. Led by Alfons Dubi of the University of Dar es Salaam’s Institute of Marine Sciences in Tanzania, WIO-RISE will have partner universities in Mozambique and South Africa. According to Dr Thomas Eyawo, the executive director of the Nairobi-based African Academy of Sciences (AAS), the initiative’s co-administrator, the competition was open to proposals in any area of basic or applied sciences and engineering, with the exception of agriculture and health sciences, which are already relatively well funded through existing programs.

The three awardees were selected from among 48 proposals involving 29 countries by a blue ribbon panel of international scientists. Proposals were evaluated based on scientific merit, training capacity, research activities, evidence of institutional support, added value of the network structure and potential for sustainability, including strategies for retaining faculty.

The timing is really spot on at this time when the continent has to adapt to a dynamic and rapidly changing world. The best coping mechanism is well trained human capital.”

RISE, which aims to strengthen higher education in the sciences and engineering by increasing the population of skilled Ph.D. and M.Sc. scientists and engineers teaching in Africa’s universities, is supported by a total of $3.2 million grant from Carnegie Corporation of New York to the Princeton, New Jersey-based Science Initiative Group (SIG) at the Institute for Advanced Study (IAS).

SIG is leading the RISE initiative in consultation with African partners including the Nairobi, Kenya-based African Academy of Sciences (AAS), the initiative’s co-administrator.

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The establishment of regional scientific research centers is in direct response to demands within Africa for more and better university-based institutions,” said Vartan Gregorian, president of Carnegie Corporation. “It is these types of investments that will facilitate Africa’s accelerated development and greater and more meaningful participation in global knowledge flows.”

The network structure is meant to facilitate the sharing of resources and scholarship.

“The RISE approach will help fortify and consolidate the community of researchers,” said SIG chair Phillip Griffiths. “By establishing knowledge networks in select fields of science, RISE will help combat the isolation that so often plagues researchers in Africa. With increased contact and cooperation, both instructors and students will profit immensely.”

According to AAS executive director Thomas Eyawo, “The RISE initiative is a welcome shot in the arm for science and technology training in African universities.

The mission of the African Academy of Sciences is to provide leadership in science and technology (S&T) innovations in Africa and to bring S&T solutions to bear on the socioeconomic challenges that Africa is currently facing.

During the next decade AAS plans to undertake visionary and innovative initiatives in renewable energy, climate change, food security, microbial diversity, health, and socio-anthropology, as well as establish a think tank to influence policy directions in these areas.

More information about SIG, RISE and the three networks selected are:

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