

Innovation hub to promote research, protect IP

Estimates of the damage done to the African economy through lack of Intellectual Property (IP) protection runs into billions of dollars.



Africa University.

African companies and industries are losing value by failing to protect their intellectual property and failing to patent innovations, warns Prof. Munashe Furusa, vice-chancellor of [Africa University](#).

Changing the culture around IP protection is one of the goals of the i5 Innovation Hub set up at Africa University.

In an interview with AfricaLive.net, Prof Munashe explained, "We have set up an innovation hub known as the i5 hub, set up to promote research, encourage innovation, technological solutions and business enterprise development.

"The i5 innovation hub gets its name from the five mantras of the innovation institution, which are; ideation, innovation, incubation, intellectual property, and industry development.

"Through this hub, the University has helped companies across the country and the continent to protect their intellectual property by assisting them in securing patents.

"In Africa, we produce a lot of innovations, but we don't protect them. Africa University is a centre of excellence for

intellectual property studies.

“We have helped organisations, the government of Zimbabwe, and also worked closely with the African Regional Intellectual Property Organisation, and the World Intellectual Property Organisation to raise awareness on intellectual property. This is important because our industries can produce innovations, but if they can’t protect them and patent the creative productions, they lose value.”

Prof. Furusa sees the innovation hub as one step towards wider changes in education and business that are required to tap into the innovative natural talents of young Africans.

“I have realised that institutions curtail children’s innovation. I have seen that when you give African children ready-made toys, they will dismantle them and start putting them back together.

“For me, rather than make toys for children, teach them how to make toys; and they will go on to develop innovations, solutions, and industries for the future. We need to provide materials, resources, and policy framework that will drive that.”

A hub for African innovation

Africa University is an institution of excellence situated in Mutare, Zimbabwe, working to produce leaders, educators, and innovators for the African continent.

Zimbabwe has unfortunately been the victim of a single story that speaks of the country’s decline and collapse. However, a story of the potential the country still holds stands out in the form of Africa University. The University is a truly Pan-African institution, and home to students from 31 African countries.

Innovation is often seen as a concern reserved for scientific or technological industries. However i5 Hub manager, Yollanda Washaya explains that fostering a culture of innovation is applicable across all industries.

“As Africa University, we knew that we needed to redefine the concept of innovation and tailor it to one that serves our needs, and our vision for the direction of innovation in Africa.

“Our aim is to generate solutions that transform the way we do business and improve the quality of life for all of the people that live on our continent and world.”

The Africa University i5 hub is open to local entrepreneurs and businesses in addition to students enrolled in the University. Prof Munashe sees collaboration with business and government as vital to fostering innovation, stating, “There has to be a strong partnership between the private sector, universities, and government, where all parties step into each other’s shoes. This approach would lead to collaborative relationships through information sharing, revenue generation and sharing, and government investment in innovation.”

Critical challenges

Africa University’s approach to research and innovation goes beyond commercial projects. The University is engaged in tackling many of the critical challenges blighting the continent from malaria to child abuse to the migration crisis engulfing parts of North Africa and Europe.

Africa University is one of the few institutions on the continent researching changes in the environment and weather patterns. In light of the recent Southern African cyclone, the University sent students to carry out environmental research which focused on spurring policy change and improving disaster preparedness and management.

Prof. Furusa explains: “We are working on some exciting and important projects, one of them being Malaria research. As a centre of excellence for malaria research, we have an insectary where we breed mosquitoes for research purposes. We

also help both companies and consumers find out if the mosquito-combating products released to the market are effective or not through our research.

“We are a centre of excellence for child rights and childhood studies as well. We are doing transformative research in conjunction with UNICEF. on how the menace of child abuse and early marriage can be defeated.

“We are also venturing into immigration and migration studies. Here we look at people’s moving patterns, most notably the recent deaths and refugee situations caused by attempts by continental Africans to cross the Mediterranean into Europe.

“We are involved in environmental research and advocacy, geared at producing research that will lead to policy recommendation, and improving disaster preparedness and management. As earlier mentioned, we are also big on intellectual property studies in Africa.

“Our intellectual property program is supported by the world intellectual property organisation, the African Regional Intellectual Property Organisation, and the Japanese government.”

Call to Action

In all areas of research and innovation, the University of Africa seeks to partner with government and the private sector. Finding solutions to the critical problems facing African nations will require broad collaboration. Prof. Furusa’s vision is for the University to be at the forefront in starting this long-overdue dialogue.

“There must be recognition that the triple helix partnership between universities, industries, and governments is vital for the development of any nation. This partnership requires governments to think like industries and universities, industries to think like government and universities, and universities to think like government and industries. This is important so that when we go into partnerships, we have a better understanding of the potential opportunities that exist for that partnership.

“A policy framework that will facilitate creative collaboration is also essential. One policy that would be essential is a policy on revenue generation and sharing, as well as intellectual property sharing.

Investment in innovation by governments themselves is also critical. There is a need for increased investment in innovation and research because that is where new products and new processes will come from.”

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