

James Kiarie, Chair of Principal Investigators, Medical Education Partnership Initiative:

One of the challenges implementing the MEPI was that this was conceived, a lot of it, by the PIs and the teams that participated in writing the proposal. We did get letters of support from the university. We got a lot of support from Ministry of Health, Ministry of Education, and most of the other stakeholders. Many times, although you are given a lot of support, and they say they will support, the administrators and policy makers do not necessarily read through the document, through every dot and everything. So there is a challenge sometimes when it comes to implementing and some of your proposed activities are seen either as changing the status quo or dramatically altering the way things are done.

I think for me one of the areas that we faced a challenge is that we wanted to develop strategic plans into how grants and other resources are managed within the university. And really this is a function of the overall university administration – to make strategic plans and plan, it is not really the role of a project. So though we had funding to support this activity, it had started looking like we are coming to somebody's house and rearranging the furniture.

And the good thing is that the university did take up the challenge, the Vice Chancellor, the Deputy Vice Chancellors did agree that this process was required. However we had to change tack in that now it was done as a university process, rather than as a project process. This was successful in that once the strategic plan is now laid out, it will have buy in from the stakeholders and also it will be pushed from the top level, and therefore the chances it will succeed are extremely high.

You need to balance between ensuring that the policy makers and the leaders are aware of what you are doing so that they buy in, and that will be critical for sustainability, but at the same time you have to balance with them not becoming day to day involved in the project. So for example for the Ministry of Health, we

have ensured that we brief the Director of Medical Services regularly. Once a year we hold a meeting with his team and I brief them on what it is we have done.

And presently we are trying a more engaging approach, whereby we will get one of the Ministry of Health senior personnel, and also from the Ministry of Education, to come and actually be sitting in our meeting that we hold once every month. That will ensure that since that person has access to the policy makers on a day to day basis, then they keep them briefed on what we are doing within our project. And probably this will get us a better buy in. So that we are not seen as really just a project, a kind of 'fly by night' operation, which will come and once the funding dries up, disappears. We hope that we can really institutionalize these activities that we are doing, including the meetings we will be having with the Ministry of Health and the other people, so that these kinds of meetings continue being part and parcel of the university activities. So this is what we are trying to make sure. Because for the policy makers, they are very slow to change, and they approach things with a lot of skepticism so you really need to convince them that this is important and this is a desired change. They are not rapid adopters of ideas.

The biggest challenge within the university has been managing a large team. I think that when you have a proposal that is proposing to work in a School of Medicine, School of Dental Sciences, School of Pharmacy, School of Nursing Sciences, School of Public Health, so you are proposing to run the team that comes from all these schools, and those people, they don't normally work together. So you have to really bring them together for them to share a vision, share a mission. And if one looks back, for example, at our mission as a project, it has kept changing, and partly it is because people have different views. So this has been, I think, the biggest challenge. It is also the biggest opportunity because really to make impact you have to work broadly with a large team. So although it is difficult, it is slow going at the beginning because we used to have five hour meetings, and they used to be even a bit acrimonious at the beginning, but I think once the team clicks, then it can achieve a lot, because different people are doing

different things, and they bring wealth and knowledge which the other team members don't have.

I would say two things, which I have been very happy that we succeeded. Of course we have had a lot of successes but maybe the greatest success has been the training in the decentralized sites. I think setting up the decentralized sites, the way the Ministry of Health took up the idea, the buy in by the Ministry of Health people, the relationships we have with the doctors and nurses and pharmacists out in the decentralized sites, has been really wonderful. And I think hearing feedback from our students who went to these sites as far as the northeast, Garissa, which is now actually kind of a war zone, they really had great experiences. I think that was very satisfying to see our students captured on national television talking about their experiences in these decentralized sites, it was really for me, kind of brought home that we are succeeding. It is working! You know, initially it was just a proposal, but once you see the student, and she is saying these good things about the training, then you really see that, oh wow, it now seems to have worked.

I think my other greatest success has been the research component. This we initially were feeling that there may be not so many people interested in writing proposals, but I think the response has been overwhelming, there have been a lot of people interested in conducting research, and this for me has been, I think, one of the greatest successes in that in the university we suddenly have people who believe that you can do research, that we need to develop research, and now we are having so many people at any one time in the university, there are people writing grants, and I am always being invited, can you come and tell us about how to write a grant, how we are writing this grant to this organization, we are doing this. I think that interest, and down the line I believe, I will wait to see whether we will also celebrate a lot of funding, which will be like to cap it all.

The library, at the University of Nairobi we are really focused on our library. Because the library has somehow been viewed, relegated to kind of a secondary role in medical education, kind of a storage of information place, a place where

people keep books and maybe a place where students sit when they want to read like it is their sitting area. The library should I think be viewed as part of their education. As an integral part of education involving the librarians because really if we are to create life-long learners they must learn how to search for information, how to evaluate information if they find it, and how to report their experiences, or their research, or whatever they do.

So the library I think needs to be put at the core, at the center, and not be seen as a place where information is stored. And I think if ever we are going to be successful as universities either in delivering very high quality education, or even as institutions, if we are going to do a lot of relevant research, it must be through strengthening the libraries and their interaction with faculty and students. So I think we need to rethink for example when students are oriented to the library, they should not just be being shown here is the library, and this is how you borrow books, that it should be like this is where you will come for this course. These are the people who will train you on this. It should be a place which is an integral part of training.

Well, it is hard, the crystal ball I think will become clearer with the years. Right now I want to see what we have in the mission, that we have improved health outcomes for Kenya. We have specific sites where we are working, so it will be very easy actually to really evaluate whether these sites are actually doing better than the sites where we are not in. And I want to see that the decentralized sites are really working.

The other thing that I see is that we hope to really strengthen the research culture within the universities. I want definitely to see the University of Nairobi and our other collaborating Kenyan universities that at the end of this funding they will definitely be making more publications, attracting more research funding, courtesy of MEPI and other initiatives. We don't have yet a number target on this, but it will be something that will be easy to see that at the end of it we will be having people publishing their findings. The number of theses, for example, people write that get to publication, we want to increase that maybe 50 – 60%.

Currently it is less than 1% of theses that students are writing are actually ever published in peer reviewed journals. So if we can increase that number. And I think with the advent of online journals the opportunity for putting out information has really also grown.

So we have now both the opportunity and I think we have the will and fortunately for these five years we also have the funding to see this dream come true.

I think what we would like maybe to initiate discussion is how have they faced, how have they addressed these kinds of challenges within their institutions? How have they addressed the issue of working with policy makers? Because I think if we share these experiences. And also how have they integrated library services? What do they see is the role of their library? Is there something across Africa that we can learn from each other? That maybe other people have done and that have resulted in immediate gains and that can probably result in more long term gains. So I'd like to hear from my colleagues what are their views on that.