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Wits University ResearchConnect helps generate significant research income

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Robin Drennan

Director of Research Development
Wits University

Background:

Internationally distinguished for its innovative research

The University of the Witwatersrand, Johannesburg (Wits University) is a 100-year-old university that grew out of a mining school and blossomed into a research-intensive university with a wide range of research strengths.

Co-founder of the African Research Universities Alliance, Wits is internationally distinguished for its excellent research, high academic standards, and its commitment to social justice in Africa and beyond. With over 50 active projects across the continent, the university is represented globally through partnerships, collaborations, staff, student exchanges, and alumni. Continuously producing innovative research with far-reaching impact, its researchers count among the leaders in their fields of expertise.

Challenge:

Identifying a more diverse range of funding opportunities

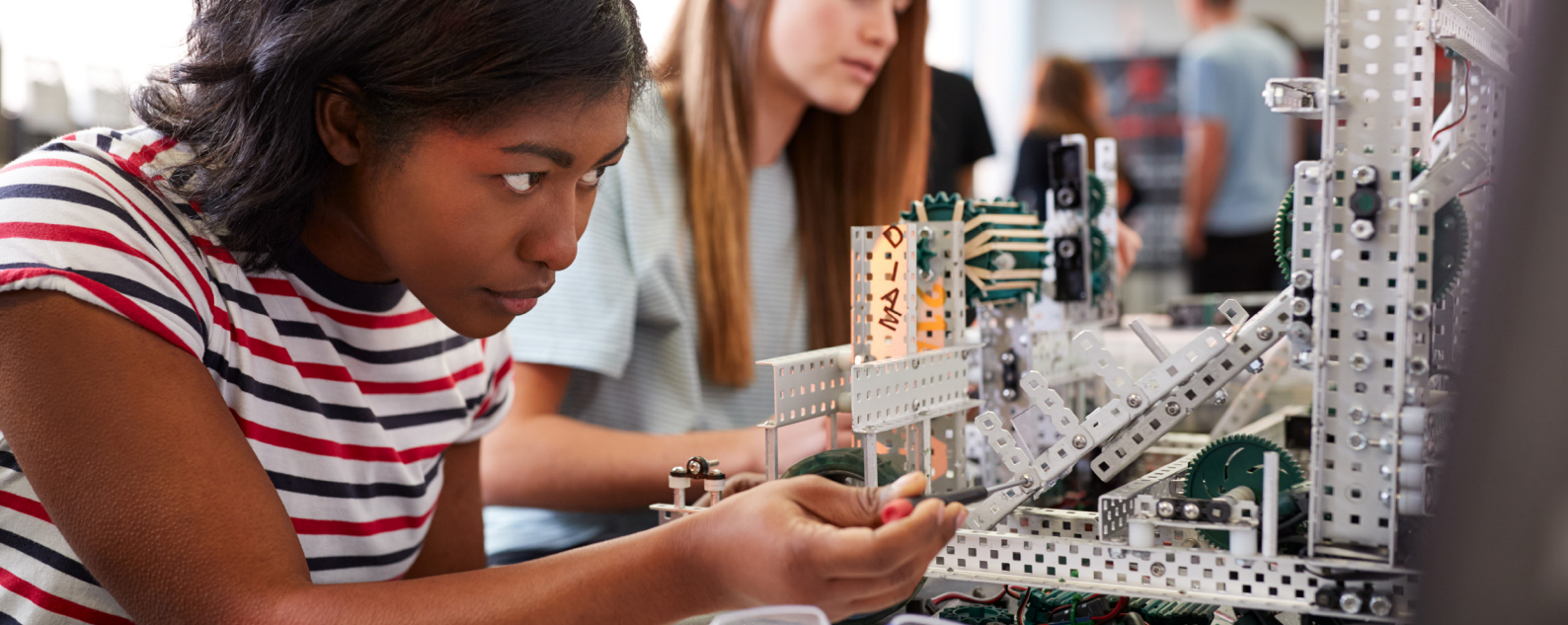
Previously, many of the research projects at Wits University were funded by the NRF (National Research Foundation) – the largest general funder in South Africa that focusses on funding individual researchers. Although the awards can be substantial, the application process for NRF is extensive and time intensive. Additionally, the NRF had to limit the amount of research funding available during the pandemic which led to a shortage of grants in comparison to growing demand.

“As the competition for grants is rapidly increasing, we’re encouraging academics to think beyond the NRF and look for funding opportunities around the world. To facilitate the same, we need to empower them with the right tools. While Google searching can be useful, the vast number of results it suggests with no filtering option can make the process confusing. We initially tried out two different grants application software products but were not impressed with the results – until we discovered ResearchConnect at the European Association of Research Managers and Administrators (EARMA) conference in Brussels,” reveals Dr Robin Drennan, Director of Research Development at Wits University.

Solution:

Accelerating access to research funds

Built for and designed by the global research community, ResearchConnect is a comprehensive, rich and trusted research funding database that accelerates access to the broadest range of research funds. Enabling a high degree of personalisation, it helps universities and research institutions find funding opportunities matched to their organisation and project needs. After running a trial, the research team at Wits found the product to be ideally suited to their requirements.



"When people tell me frustratedly that if only they could find funds, they could do wonders, I, as a research manager feel it's my job to make sure they've got proper means to quickly identify relevant funds. And with ResearchConnect, we've achieved that. It's a simple, easy-to-use intuitive tool; not at all complicated like the previous products we've tried," Robin explains.

Outcome:

Significant new funding secured year-on-year

According to Robin, "Every year, ResearchConnect helps us secure significant amounts of free funding. The platform provides our researchers with real-time grants and funding information from a diverse range of funders – ensuring they are presented with the most suitable funds and the best chance of funding success."

Clever use of icons in the platform to represent the category or discipline of funds helps researchers instantly identify the type of funding along with key information about the fund.

According to Robin, "The ResearchConnect platform is intuitively laid out. The share feature in the platform lets researchers easily collaborate with colleagues and partners. Users can also save time and resources with automated email alerts and news updates about new funding opportunities."

Researchers can personalise content and perform accurate searches by using flexible filters, keywords, and phrases in the ResearchConnect platform. Filtered results from thousands of funds are presented detailing the most relevant opportunities, which can be ordered and displayed by deadline or status. Search results can be further expanded from a concise summary of the fund to a more detailed report, giving all the information a researcher requires to assess eligibility. Moreover, the platform also allows easy access to saved searches – making the search process simpler and more efficient.

"The search filters are incredibly useful for generating relevant results because if you search Google Scholar, you'll come across various funding opportunities – many of which may not be open to universities here in South Africa. So, ploughing through hundreds of opportunities in a platform like Google Scholar may turn out to be a waste of time and effort for our academics as most of these funds are closed to us. In order to show the correct results, ResearchConnect narrows down

the search criteria with factors such as the location of the research and what country you're affiliated with – which I think is really helpful for anyone looking out for funds", Robin explains.

Wits University was using the previous version of ResearchConnect when it signed a three-year contract with Idox in 2018. Considering the benefits derived from the platform, last year, the university migrated to the latest version of the software and renewed its contract with Idox for five more years.

"It was nice to be involved in the testing of the latest version of ResearchConnect and sharing our feedback. We were one of the first customers who got to see and try the product. Now, we're on the latest version and I continue to be impressed by the interface. I'm pleased that the new and improved version of ResearchConnect is indeed better. Many times, during this process, companies end up making products complicated. But I'm glad Idox retained the simplicity and streamlined nature of the ResearchConnect platform", Robin adds.

Talking about the overall experience of working with Idox, Robin says, "I've always had great support from Corinna Traurig, Account Manager for ResearchConnect at Idox. She's helped us with university workshops and two to three training sessions every year and is in regular contact just to make sure everything is running smoothly. She also provides me with user statistics from time to time which I find very useful."

Today, Wits University has a dedicated team within its research department to maximise the benefits of ResearchConnect and 860 active users of the platform. As research intensity at the university is growing exponentially, the need for funding is skyrocketing.

"Over the last five to ten years, our external research funding income has grown substantially, and I can categorically say that ResearchConnect has certainly contributed to the growth in the level of research funds generated by the academics of Wits", Robin concludes.

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