

UWC HIV and AIDS RESEARCH CENTRE

STRATEGIC DIRECTIONS AND BUSINESS PLAN

ACADEMIC RATIONALE AND DEVELOPMENT CONTEXT

HIV continues to be a critical barrier to achieving health and development goals in sub-Saharan Africa. This is especially the case in Southern Africa, where AIDS has reversed gains in life expectancy made in the post-colonial period and where the pandemic shows few signs of abating. The extraordinarily high rates of infection among young women are particularly troubling: 49% of women under 25 are infected in Swaziland. Data from ante-natal care clinics in Durban presented at the July 2009 International AIDS Society conference indicate that in some areas, 66% of pregnant women attending ante-natal care are HIV positive by the time they are 22 years old.

On the positive side, the global community – including, very significantly, governments in the global South – has multiplied the financial resources available to tackle HIV/AIDS, though there is still a major gap from what is required. Scientists around the world have joined forces to understand the biology of both the virus and the disease better, with progress slowly being made towards both vaccines and microbicides – though neither of these are likely to be available within the short to medium term. Remarkable advances have been made in rolling out anti-retroviral treatment in Africa, less than 10 years after the “consensus” global opinion was that any AIDS treatment in Africa would be financially, and operationally, out of the question in the foreseeable future.

Yet for every person who starts ART, two are infected with HIV. Progress in implementing programmes to prevent mother-to-child transmission of HIV has been disappointingly slow. And we know very little about what works, and why, to realign the broader socio-cultural, political and economic patterns which shape and drive the epidemic – and how these interact with biological and other factors.

Research on how to improve HIV prevention and treatment programmes in specific, real-world contexts is still limited, poorly funded, and poorly coordinated. Research on both the broader social determinants of HIV infection and disease and effective societal interventions against these determinants is even scarcer. Sustained, integrated and rigorously examined approaches to strengthening human and systems capacities in both research and intervention are only now beginning to be implemented. UWC's multifaculty PEPFAR/CDC-funded programme for strengthening human capacity to address HIV and TB is one of very few examples of efforts to develop human capacities across sectors and communities, and to learn from both the process and the outcomes

systematically. In recent years, we have seen a dramatic increase in attention to the challenges facing the health systems which must deliver the ART that has proved to be a lifeline to millions, yet research on systems is still the exception and not the rule. Schools and communities as systems, rather than as collections of individuals, have similarly been neglected.

The overwhelming emphasis in research and practice focuses on individual clinical or behavioural interventions. Yet in Southern Africa AIDS is a generalized, almost exclusively sexually transmitted infection that always involves at least two people. Their relationships and interactions are deeply embedded in complex social and economic networks characterized by pervasive inequality and long histories of structural, interpersonal, political, and gender-based violence.

HIV and AIDS prevention, treatment and care must be tackled comprehensively, from a systems perspective, in comprehensive social, public health and public policy frameworks. We must find, rigorously implement, and share ways to work both at the context-specific front line of the pandemic as it plays out in relationships, families, communities, schools, clinics, and politics, and to “join up” this work to build a body of robust knowledge – practice, theory, methods, and results – that transcends specific micro-contexts. It is this nexus of crisis and, potentially, creative opportunity, which UWC’s HIV and AIDS Research Centre is poised to address.

HIV RESEARCH AT UWC

The 2009 HIV Audit conducted by UWC’s HIV and AIDS Programme identified over 200 discrete research products and activities, covering nearly all faculties of the university and ranging from student research projects to major collaborative research programmes. Some of this work was presented at a March 2009 Symposium organized under DBBS Project 3. Participants expressed tremendous interest in learning about others’ work and in finding ways to collaborate or, at least, to share and coordinate efforts more regularly and more effectively. In keeping with UWC’s history, much of the research was linked closely to teaching, policy, and on-the-ground practice with communities, NGOs, and health and education practitioners, managers, and decision makers. The large number of Master’s theses in the UWC HIV Audit indicates that there is a substantial body of potential researchers who could bring a range of disciplinary and topical perspectives to bear on HIV. Some faculties and departments have developed a particular focus around HIV. For example, the Faculty of Education and the HIV & AIDS Programme have developed a very significant body of curriculum and education intervention. The School of Public Health and colleagues in other departments within the Faculty of Community and Health Sciences have developed a large body of linked research around HIV, including

several large grants involving South African and international partnerships, recent academic appointments, and doctoral students attached to research programmes.

In addition to this overall context of diverse, active, and coordination-ready research, three larger programmes of research, capacity strengthening, and education intervention provide a specific foundation for the HIV and AIDS Research Centre:

- DBBS/VLIR Project 3, now housed at the School of Public Health in the Faculty of Community and Health Sciences, provides important seed funding and an impetus for developing a world-class research Centre. The initial three thematic pillars of the Centre emerge from the VLIR projects: health systems, schools and education systems, and gender and gender based violence. Three doctoral students in the thematic areas are supported under the DBBS initiative. Project 8 provides support for an annual symposium. Integrative, cross-disciplinary work is made possible through Master's and Post-Doctoral scholarships;
- A major CDC grant supports capacity development efforts across sectors and populations and provides a grounded basis for building intersectoral research programmes. This grant also funds administrative support for the Centre, as well as the nucleus of cross-project synthesis and research development activities;
- UWC's HIV & AIDS Programme, with its strong body of outreach, peer education, and partnerships, will be a key partner to the HIV Research Centre.

RELATION TO OTHER HIV and AIDS RESEARCH PROGRAMMES

There is a large number of HIV-related units, programmes, centres and initiatives, reflecting the dramatic increase in interest and funding for HIV over the past several years. Much of the Africa-focused research continues to be led from North American (especially U.S.) and European institutions, though several South African universities have well-developed HIV research structures. UWC scholars already collaborate closely with individual researchers or teams at other universities, notably UCT, Pretoria, Stellenbosch, and UKZN. UWC's HIV&AIDS Research Centre will add value in its emphasis on integrating research across sectors and disciplines, on ensuring strong links to capacity strengthening, policy and practice, and in a university-wide reach from a strong base in public health. It will support the emerging vision and priorities of UWC as articulated in the IOP, through emphasizing postgraduate training and research which both builds on and significantly enhances current practice at UWC.

THE UWC HIV and AIDS RESEARCH CENTRE¹: VISION, AIMS AND OBJECTIVES

The new UWC HIV and AIDS Research Centre will be a world-class hub for sharing, developing and implementing engaged, policy and practice-related research that tackles HIV and AIDS prevention, treatment and care in a comprehensive, systemic, intersectoral and interdisciplinary perspective. The Centre will actively link to, identify and foster synergies among, and develop major new research efforts building on HIV/AIDS programming, research, teaching and capacity strengthening efforts already underway at UWC to build an African and global centre of excellence. It will actively engage communities, schools, the health system, and gender and social equity advocates in developing, conducting, sharing, and applying research and teaching. Visiting scholars, students, staff and others will visit the Centre and participate in its seminars, public events, workshops, and research projects.

The Centre builds on existing funding and thematic pillars to contribute to the vision of understanding and strengthening the “dynamics of building a better society” in relation to a critical public health and societal challenge of our time in this region – HIV.

The *specific objectives* of the Centre are:

1. To conduct and promote multidisciplinary research in the areas of integrated HIV and AIDS prevention and care, with an initial focus on health policies and systems, education, and gender based violence;
2. To develop sustainable HIV-related research capacity at the University, through providing a research base at the University for staff and student fellows in multidisciplinary research and capacity strengthening related to integrated HIV and AIDS prevention and care;
3. To contribute, through research, to the transformation and strengthened capacities of health and education policies and systems and of broader community and social systems to decrease the burden of HIV and related conditions, including effective responses to gender-based violence;
4. To harness, encourage and coordinate demonstrated multidisciplinary research potential related to HIV across the faculties of the University through seminars and workshops;

¹ Naming conventions in the field of HIV and AIDS are contested and changing. Some advocacy organizations recommend using “HIV” only, and not HIV/AIDS or “HIV and AIDS”. UNAIDS currently uses both terms. This proposal uses “HIV and AIDS Research Centre” and, in the constitution, the “UWC Centre for Research in HIV and AIDS”, in order to maintain symmetry with UWC’s pre-existing HIV&AIDS Programme, an important partner to the new Research Centre.

5. To fundraise for and develop research partnerships around planned projects that are in line with the Centre's broad aims and objectives.

GOVERNANCE

The Centre is housed within and administered through the School of Public Health in the Faculty of Community and Health Sciences. The Director of the Research Centre reports to the Director of the School of Public Health and consults the interfaculty Advisory Board on matters of strategy, high-level oversight, and aims and objectives.

The Constitution requires two Board meetings annually and allows for extraordinary meetings. For the first year, four (4) Board meetings will be set on approval of the Centre by Senate, in order to allow for more intensive strategic input during the crucial formative period.

The Constitution and governance comply with existing UWC requirements and align well with the vision articulated in the IOP currently awaiting ratification. The Constitution and operations may be amended from time to time in accordance with evolving policy at UWC.

CENTRE STRUCTURE AND ACTIVITIES

Structure, infrastructure, staff

The attached draft Constitution of the Centre describes the roles and structures for the Director and Advisory Board of the Centre.

Core staff:

- Director
- Centre Administrator (Level 12). This position is critical to managing the basic clearinghouse and administrative functions of the Centre. It is currently funded through existing external funding which is expected to continue for 2-3 years.
- Communication/Web/Outreach Officer (Junior Lecturer level). This knowledge management and outreach role will be key to the success of the Centre as a hub for coordinated, multidisciplinary research across the university. We envisage this position to evolve

over the first 1-2 years of the Centre, and to be funded out of externally generated funds for 3-5 years.

Contributing staff:

- CDC Project Manager and Evaluation/Synthesis Officer: will ensure that the evaluation and synthesis activities for which s/he is responsible will inform the ongoing work of the Centre.
- SoPH Project Manager: ensures that liaison and synergies with all SoPH projects will remain active and productive.
- SoPH general finance/admin staff are currently also managing Centre finances.
 - should the Centre grow significantly, Project Manager/Coordinator and Finance Officer positions specific to the Centre will need to be created
- SoPH and other UWC faculty actively contribute to Centre research projects, seminars and publications.

Core infrastructure has been acquired through a University grant at the end of last fiscal year. This has supplied initial computer, software, tele-and videoconferencing equipment. The SoPH contributes space and office supplies. Additional library resources have been ordered through the Library, with DBBS funding. Further infrastructure needs will be identified and prioritized over the coming months.

Strategic activities and investments

The major activity and output of the Centre will be to develop, implement and communicate coherent and collaborative programmes of multidisciplinary research as described in the vision and objectives. Specific research and outreach programmes of the Centre will emerge organically over time, in line with the integrative vision and building on the original thematic and project building blocks outlined above. In particular, the Centre will develop

- *Research programmes and partnerships* comprising larger scale epidemiological or survey work, context specific qualitative and

ethnographic work, and rigorous ongoing literature and research review and synthesis.

Fundamentally, the Centre will create space and opportunity for creative collaboration in research and its application. In that sense, it is a virtual Centre which depends on the vision and leadership of its core team and the research community. However, strategic activities and investments will catalyze and maintain this creative, dynamic vision and interchange and foster the development and implementation of major research projects and programmes.

- *Clearinghouse and website:* the Centre will actively seek out and disseminate announcements of HIV-research-related seminars and lectures at UWC and selectively beyond UWC, in order to foster increased awareness and communication across faculties, disciplines and institutions. In collaboration with SANBI and the HIV & AIDS Programme, the Centre will build a user-friendly, interactive data base. A shared website for the HIV Research Centre and the UWC HIV & AIDS Programme will be developed and maintained.
- *Annual UWC HIV and AIDS Audit:* This function will move to the HIV Research Centre from the HIV & AIDS Programme, to be conducted in collaboration with the HIV & AIDS Programme with respect to service, teaching, outreach, and campus activities.
- *Seminar and lecture series:* The Centre will launch a seminar and lecture series in 2009.
- *Research Fellows:* Research Fellowships for UWC faculty will provide opportunities to deepen and develop emerging research programmes, publish, and participate in collaborative events and activities in the three thematic cores of the Centre. We hope to launch these in January 2010, if funding can be secured. Initially, it is likely that short term fellowships (3 months) will be launched, but we envisage longer fellowships that are complemented by concurrent visiting scholars or other equivalent resources to the Fellow's home department.
- *Visiting Fellows:* Short and longer term visiting fellows will contribute to the Centre's goal of remaining on the South African

and global leading edge of the field. We envisage travel support and modest stipends for several short term visitors and hope to host sabbaticants from within and outside of South Africa

- *Publications and productions:*

Three types of products are proposed:

- Briefs and Updates on UWC research
- Event reports and productions, including videos, based on the flagship events described below
- A UWC “Beyond The Project” series -- a package of systematic and critical review, analysis, workshop, publication, and research and policy recommendations linked to promising or controversial interventions in HIV/AIDS. Many interventions are developed, tested, and implemented in a project, one-off, way, without taking into account the system impacts. The Beyond The Project series will help researchers, communities, and policy makers to analyse proposed interventions in the systems, integrated context at the heart of the Centre’s vision. It will help to fill a crucial gap in the HIV/AIDS field – both in research and in practice.

- *Flagship events:*

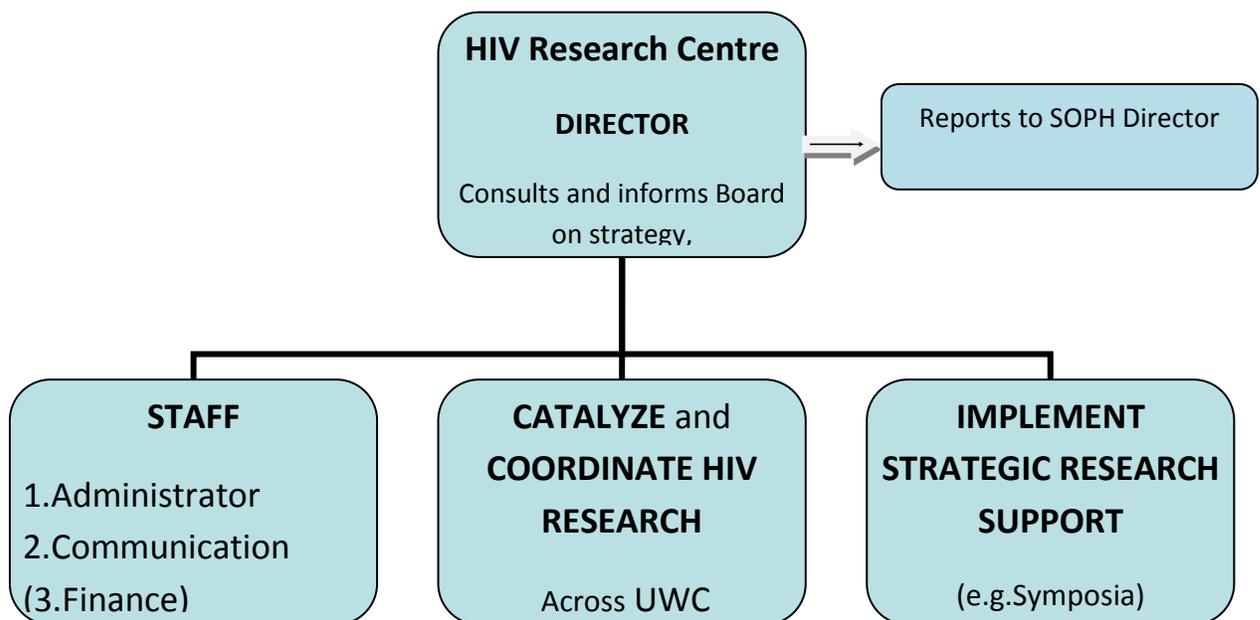
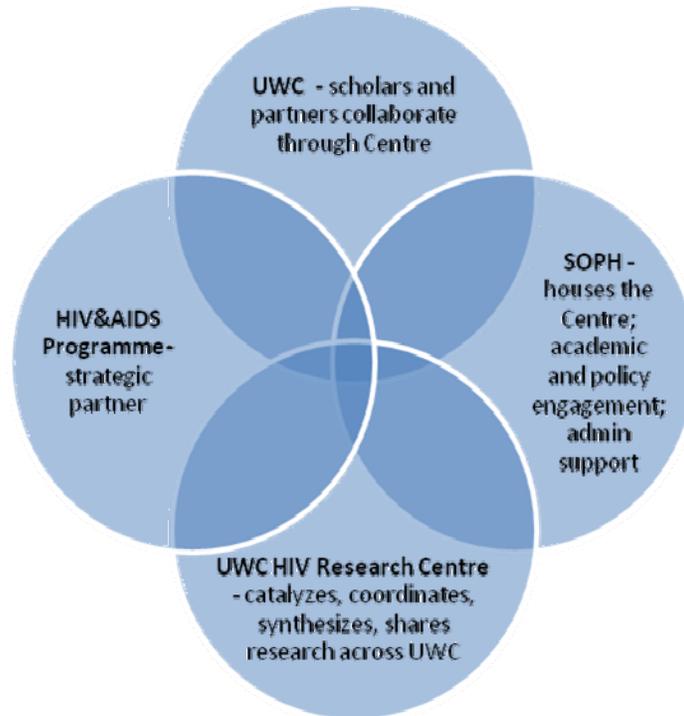
- *Annual Research Symposium* - VLIR Project 8 supports an annual symposium, the first of which was held in late March 2009. This was a very successful event which spurred considerable interfaculty and interinstitutional exchange and collaboration, together with three state-of-the-art papers and writing/proposal development workshops. We expect this to be an annual event.
- *Annual public engagement and public policy symposium* - in addition, we envisage an annual event involving civil society and/or policy makers, as a forum for informing and sharing research by focusing on the implementation and collaboration realities and challenges facing civil society, practitioners, and policy makers. This annual event would be part of an integrated annual cycle of research, workshops, seminars, and innovative outreach activities, rather than a stand alone event. It would ideally link to the annual research symposium described above.

Training and internship opportunities contributing to the Centre vision

- DBBS-funded MA and Post-Doc Fellows in HIV Research as well as in Excellence and Innovation in Communication will develop and foster the cross-sectoral and cross-disciplinary linkages and innovative communication strategies and technologies central to the vision of the Centre.
- The Centre and UWC's HIV & AIDS Programme are exploring a shared Internship, as a key liaison site between the Research Centre and the HIV Programme
- The Centre will attract and support graduate and post-doctoral students and researchers, to be co-supervised at times by teaching staff across departments and faculties in a way that recognizes and rewards inter-departmental and inter-faculty efforts and contributions.

MONITORING AND EVALUATION

A comprehensive M&E plan will be developed and approved by the Board during the first year. A preliminary indicative framework and suggested indicators are attached to this document. As the Centre aims to transform practice and not only produce easily counted "outputs", indicators will be developed to measure the dynamics and relationships over time as a community of practice develops. External review will complement internal M&E, in line with SOPH and UWC practice and timelines.



The **UWC HIV Research Centre** is housed in and supported by the School of Public Health, Faculty of Community and Health Sciences. The Centre *catalyzes and coordinates* engaged, multidisciplinary HIV-related research across the Faculty and University and *implements* strategic activities to support and add value to research and its use (symposia, clearinghouse and website, seminars, recruiting and hosting graduate students and postdoctoral and other fellows, publication series, fundraising.) The Centre shares a website and key activities with UWC's HIV&AIDS Programme. The *initial research foci* are: health policies and systems; education and learning; gender-based violence; capacity strengthening.

