

Assessing University Research Governance Practices and Structures in Developing Countries: The Nigerian Universities' Experience

P. E. Okonji

Research and Innovation Office, University of Lagos

O.C. Okiki

Library Services, University of Lagos

I. A. Idowu

Research and Innovation Office, University of Lagos

B. I. Alo

Department of Chemistry, University of Lagos

ABSTRACT

While most universities in the developed world, by tradition, have research offices to handle research management, structures for the efficient coordination and strong governance of research are nascent within many Sub-Saharan African universities. In this paper we look at the organizational structures, policies and functions of research offices for supporting faculty research as well as their management operations in 5 selected Nigerian universities. The authors interviewed 20 participants from 5 selected federal universities in Nigeria. Five directors of the research offices and 15 research administrators participated. Findings identified existing infrastructure for research management, the challenges facing newly created research offices in Nigerian universities, and strategies employed by research offices to tackle identified problems. Findings also showed how policies, practices, institutional structures and support models for research governance are shifting to align with international best practices. Recommendations suggested by participants for developing effective research management practices are discussed.

INTRODUCTION

In recent years, the growing complexity of sponsors' requirements, evolving research portfolio, and emphasis on collaborative research has informed the need for Research Management Offices (RMOs), which function to coordinate research administration needs between various departments and institutions (Kirkland & Ajai-Ajagbe, 2013). Globally, universities and colleges are driven by the quality of research, innovative output from cutting-edge research, and comprehensive management of innovation (Arai et al., 2007). The setting up of RMOs in Nigerian Higher Education Institutions (HEIs) is an emerging trend, and information on structures that should be considered in order to maximize efficiency and effectiveness is scarce (Nagebu & Naibbi, 2017). Little is known about the predominant practices of research management or what practice of innovation management is appropriate. There also is a notable lack of understanding of frameworks for the successful and efficient operation of RMOs able to cater to increasing demands by international funding agencies for effective grant management (Altbach et al., 2011). A recent study by Mashaah et al. (2014) on available systems for research management pointed out that some African universities have

limited capacity for efficient research governance, which could erode donor confidence in the universities' research oversight. According to Mashaah et al., major challenges limiting research in Zimbabwean universities, and many other African institutions, include lack of adequate resources to sustain structures and systems for research governance and management. Most African universities are instruction-oriented and have minimal financial, let alone policies and structural support for research (Kirkland & Ajai-Ajagbe, 2013; Mashaah et al., 2014).

As part of a resolve to strengthen research and innovation management practices in Nigerian universities, the Nigerian National Universities Commission (NUC) enacted a policy which required all universities in Nigeria to establish research offices with responsibilities for increasing access to and the efficient management of external funding. Many Nigerian universities' responsiveness to the NUC directive has been rather sluggish, however, and laced with circumspection, since many institutions are, to a large extent, unsure of the type of organizational structure needed to run an efficient RMO. Currently, only a few Nigerian universities have a research management office. In this study we aimed to explore existing policies and predominant practices for effective research

management in selected Nigeria universities with a view to creating an understanding of the common challenges confronting the practice of research management. We also sought to show how research management challenges are tackled and to make recommendations for effective research administration.

METHODS

Study Design

In this study, a qualitative approach was adopted so that the study aims were consistent with the selected methodology. This study design allowed us to critically explore the views of consulted staff members in various RMOs and make meanings from their comments (Mavatera & Kroeze, 2009; Whitehead, 2005). The flexibility afforded by this methodology also allowed participants to narrate their experiences and share their personal and collective accounts of challenges encountered as research support staff.

Sampling and Data Collection

All sampled universities were providing research management services to support faculty with pre- and post-award grant processes as well as efficient management of Intellectual Property (IP). Five RMO directors in 5 federal universities and 15 research administrators from the 5 universities participated in this study. Twenty one-to-one interviews and two focus group discussion sessions were conducted with the participants. Data from the one-to-one interviews and focus group

discussions were transcribed verbatim and analyzed using NVivo version 10 (QSR Australia). All participants were RMO staff members within the selected universities. Only RMOs in existence for at least three years were included, and all participants had worked within the RMOs for at least one year. This was done to ensure that only those who fully understood the day-to-day functioning and operations of the research offices participated in the study. Six universities were randomly sampled (three from the North and three from the South region of the country). The three universities sampled from the North were: University of Maiduguri, University of Jos, and Ahmadu Bello University. The three universities from the South were: University of Ibadan, University of Calabar, and University of Lagos. Universities were selected to ensure an even geographic spread.

Prior to recruitment of participants, emails with study details and assurances of the voluntary nature of the study were disseminated to participants. Consent was subsequently obtained and one-to-one interview visits were scheduled at the RMOs of consenting institutions. Additional information on the study was provided to all participants and opportunities to ask questions were afforded before starting interviews. One-to-one interviews and focus group discussions took place between November 2016 and March 2017 on dates

convenient to consenting participants. The Focus Group Discussions (FGDs) were held at the University of Lagos Research and Innovation Office. All FGD participants were compensated for their travels to the University of Lagos. Interviews were semi-structured and designed to explore the RMOs' models of operation, organizational structures (such as staffing), and functions (roles and scope of research support provided to faculty), and challenges and recommendations for efficient RMOs. One-to-one interview questions were developed based on literature on research management practices. Interviews were audio-recorded with participants' consent and typically lasted 45 minutes to one hour. Ethical approval for the study was granted by the University of Lagos' Research Ethics Committee. The names represented in this paper are pseudonyms. This is in accordance with participants' ethical right to anonymity.

Data Analysis

Thematic analysis was used to identify patterns in the data. This allowed for rich and in-depth scrutiny of structures, functions, and challenges of research administration. Initially, verbatim extracts with similar meanings were grouped into codes (Ritchie, Spencer, & O'Connor, 2003). The coded categories were further refined by comparing the data within and between interviews, and by continually assessing relationships between all generated codes.

In addition, the coded categories inductively identified through the theory-driven and exploratory process of the interpretive paradigm were discussed by the team.

FINDINGS

Four themes emerged: "organizational structure and staffing policies", "grant management support structures and challenges", "faculty awareness and acceptance inertia", and "practices and strategies that worked". The quotes were verbatim excerpts from one-to-one interviews conducted with participants, and analyses of focus group interviews.

Organizational Structure and Staffing Practices

All six universities had directors, deputy directors, administrators, and secretaries within RMOs. Notably, all RMO directors were academics who worked within their respective institutions as professors. A common practice across all universities sampled was that only academic staff members function as directors because academics and research were considered to be interwoven:

I think that in all universities, you should have an academic as director because they understand the rudiments of these things; if we don't have them the research office would not make progress [P#4].

Another participant commented:
If we have a non-academic director, then he is not likely to function very well because I remember when someone committed to

research assumed the office of the Deputy Vice-Chancellor of Research, things started working out for us. [P#3]

One of the directors believed that with policies allowing special institutional considerations; such as waivers on teaching time, academic directors might be able to devote ample time to performing their duties more efficiently in the RMOs:

It depends on the support that you have from the administration. I am supervising and still doing research; in terms of teaching, what they did for me, which really helped a great deal, was that they created a position for someone else to take up my teaching. [D2]

In one of the interviews, one participant (P#4) suggested that a new employment practice, based solely on nominations, was responsible for the selective bias and exclusivity of placing academics into directorship positions: *“Only if researchers from research institutes can apply for the job. But Research Offices are new offices and so the practice now is more of nominations by universities”*. At the FGDs, participants remarked that having a mix of both academic and non-academic staff would be a better staffing strategy.

However, staffing was low in some institutions; participants noted a general absence of staff with background/core academic training in research administration. Many staff members had bachelor’s and master’s degree in the sciences, medical sciences, social sciences

and humanities. One university employed only academics as core staff within the RMOs. New Ph.D.s were recruited to work full-time within the research office as Research Fellows (RFs) and as full-time administrators:

We assigned Research Fellows to work in different faculties so those involved in the primary faculty try to midwife the research ideas and we follow that through - even vetting proposals. It’s only in very few cases you say we want to vet if not we help them, guiding them all through submissions. [D2]

A major challenge was the lack of a clear strategic academic career advancement plan for the Research Fellows working in the RMOs. This particular gap made it difficult for RFs to know the criteria for their career progression, and prospects for promotion. According to one participant:

There are no clear career progression plans yet for Research Fellows but we are working on a Research Professorship, so that they can become Research Professors. [D4]

Grant Management Support Structures and Challenges

All universities surveyed had research grant management support structures, but faced some common challenges. A recurring challenge reported throughout the one-to-one interviews was the stringent policies and internal (institutional) bureaucratic bottle-neck involved in accessing funds released by funding agencies. This was captured in a director’s comment:

I guess that, for a context like here, it might be good to have a physical structure that is outside of the bursary just because it takes longer to get money out of the bursary, we try to navigate that challenge, for some of our grant, the grantee depending on who they are establishes a relationship with a different institution that has a more flexible fiscal structure. [P#7]

Some participants commented on the need to tread cautiously in trying to replicate developed country universities' practices for accessing funds and/or research grant management models (e.g., the phenomenon of establishing Research Foundations). This was illustrated when one of the directors said:

I think we have to be careful because we are also just starting. Many Western world universities have been there before 1960, so one has to be careful in setting up this independent entity. For us, there is a policy restricting employment at the moment. Now you should think carefully before you create an entity unless the entity is going to generate fund and be able to pay staff. [D1]

Communicating research output to a wider public was another common challenge reported by the participants during the FGDs. Since some Research Administrators (RAs) sometimes supported researchers' efforts to find a suitable journal in which to publish and communicate their research output to a wider public, many believed that this standard practice still remains a challenge in Nigerian universities:

A lot of research publications and innovations come up in this part of the world but in terms of uptake of research output, patents and intellectual property management, not much has been done, which is not so good for our universities and our Research Management Office is trying to tackle this challenge [D5]

Faculty Awareness and Acceptance Inertia

Participants' comments suggest that while RMOs are rapidly evolving in universities across developed countries, this concept is emerging and yet to be embraced by many HEIs in Nigeria. Some directors noted that a majority of faculty and staff members were not keen on consulting the RMOs and simply had the impression that the creation of research offices was unnecessary:

So the whole thing is oh what are all these people talking about?'- that was the way it was when I came in, so we had to think of ways to first of all create awareness and then some bits of motivation for faculty to visit the research office. [P#11]

Some participants wished to decentralize the RMOs in order to expand awareness. One specific strategy to achieve this, recommended by some participants, was to ensure that a research administrator was employed as a permanent academic staff in all different faculties, as illustrated in the comment:

Academics here customarily think that, if they win a grant they have worked for it after all they wrote it, but we have helped

with setting-up the Office. However, there are some times they say they want minimal interference by what we are doing but that doesn't help because as far as the university is concerned the image of the university is at stake. [D4]

Practices and Strategies That Worked

Participants shared strategies that were deployed to foster faculty members' cooperation as well as to ensure efficient day-to-day operation of the RMOs. The research administrators believed that understanding the prevailing academic environment and/or entrenched dispositions of faculty members and adapting customer-friendly approaches to "woo" them was a key factor in RMOs' success:

We pick specific funding opportunities relevant to faculties and send to them via email listserve. The first thing was identifying specifically what might be relevant. Initially faculty members were reluctant, but after a while they started responding. [D2]

Another major strategy that reportedly worked was helping faculty members to obtain institutional support documents for their research grant applications. In this way, faculty confidence in the availability of expeditious support was bolstered. One research administrator agreed, saying: "We always inform them that any supporting document they want to get from the management which could take 2-3 weeks we can get it in two to three days." [P#6]

In some of the universities, one of the policies implemented to increase awareness of the RMOs focused on empowering them to play key roles, such as facilitating research workshops and seminars. For example, in one university, the Research Office organized annual research conferences and fairs. The RMO directors believed that one way to increase awareness of RMOs was to involve RAs in university operations for local and international research-related activities, including the planning of annual conferences, faculty research workshops, and publication of annual research reports.

DISCUSSION

The study set out to explore the current structure, functions, and practices of Research Management Offices (RMOs) in selected Nigerian universities with a view to understanding intricacies, challenges, and complexities of research management that are peculiar to them, and to make recommendations for efficient research administration that can be adopted by universities in Nigeria and other developing countries. Findings demonstrated that the establishment of RMOs is an emerging concept; participants' comments indicated that many faculty members were not aware of the relevance of these establishments.

Some previous projects to strengthen research management at African universities (Bamiro, 2013; Carnegie

Corporation, 2008) recommended following a 3-phase model in developing research management structures in African universities: (1) awareness raising, (2) conversion of awareness into organizational structure, and (3) development of an external support environment. This study agreed with Kirkland and Ajai-Ajagbe (2013, p. 4), who stated that these three phases are “mutually supportive and likely to run currently” as participants pointed out the need to catch-up with the rest of the leading global universities on international best practices for research management. This underscored the importance of treating issues of awareness raising in continuous sequence with other adjacent elements. Thus, although the three phases are quite distinct, universities in this study treated them as a continuum in the rapid development of research management.

About the challenges of setting-up and the day-to-day operations of the RMOs, participating institutions faced some common challenges, leading to common recommendations for success. First, many of the universities had decentralized research administrative structures, which sometimes exacerbated bureaucratic research management protocols. Another major challenge was the lack of a clear strategic academic career advancement plan for the Research Fellows working in the RMOs. While routine career advancement structures for university-wide

administrators were adopted for research administrators (RAs), the RFs’ career structure and progression plan remained uncertain. Lastly, financial management systems were domiciled in the Bursary units and all funds were within a common repository governed exclusively by that office. Thus, it might be worthwhile for RMOs to consider separating funds from external sources from ‘main’ university funds for trouble-free access. Such practices have not yet been established in the Nigerian research universities.

The directors of sampled RMOs acknowledged that establishing the infrastructure for efficient research management requires significant resources. However, with the constraints caused by limited human resources (i.e., the dearth of staff with professional backgrounds in research management and administration in Nigeria) and inadequate post-award infrastructure, the RMOs in this study struggled to attain efficient research administration. These RMOs either shifted existing policies (on staff employment and post-award management) to meet international best practice standards or adapted administrative practices while considering locally available resources.

CONCLUSION

The practice of research management is an emerging concept in Nigeria universities; approaches to research management in these universities were diverse. What will

work for Nigerian research institutions will depend, to a large extent, on recognizing the uniqueness of local systems and adapting existing international models to suit local contexts. Universities intending to set up RMOs in Nigeria should ensure that the offices are reasonably staffed with appropriately qualified and trained individuals. Based on the experiences of universities involved in this study, notable challenges include problems of staffing, awareness, access to grants released by funding agencies, and career advancement

paths for RMs. Universities in developing countries embarking on the establishment of RMOs must develop clear guidelines to tackle faculty acceptance and university compliance with sponsor expectations, and gain institutional support.

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ABOUT THE AUTHORS

Patrick Emeka Okonji, OD, MPH, PhD, is a Research Fellow at the Office of Research and Innovation, University of Lagos. He works as a Research Administrator with specialization in managing pre-award and post-award protocols as well as providing faculty members with support for proposal development at the University of Lagos.

Olatokunbo Christopher Okiki, BA, MLS, PhD, is the Head, of Automation Unit, University of Lagos Library, Lagos, Nigeria. His research interest covers information literacy skills, digitization, ICT application in libraries, information management, and indigenous knowledge. He is an active member Nigeria Library Association (NLA).

Idowu Adeola Ibijoke, BSc, MEM, PhD, is a Research Fellow at the Office of Research and Innovation, University of Lagos. She works as a Research Administrator. Her roles include monitoring and evaluation of research processes to ensure adherence to funders' requirements and expectations, coordination of research clusters and ensuring high standard of reporting.

Babajide I. Alo, BSc, PhD, FAS, was the former Deputy Vice-Chancellor for Academics and Research at the University of Lagos. He is a distinguished Professor of Environmental Chemistry. He is a member of several professional bodies; Fellow, Chemical Society of Nigeria, Fellow, Institute of Public Analysts of Nigeria, Fellow, Environmental Society of Nigeria, and Fellow, Institute of Chartered Chemists of Nigeria.