

**PRODUCTIVITY AND CAPACITY BUILDING
IN THE NIGERIAN RESEARCH ENVIRONMENT**

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I. Introduction

Over the last two decades, there has been persistent decline in productivity in virtually all sectors in Nigeria. Capacity has also decayed considerably in virtually all sectors. The decision to make productivity and capacity building the theme of this year's conference of Zonal Research Units of Central Bank of Nigeria is not only thoughtful but also very timely as it will afford the opportunity to take stock of the present situation which should provide a guide to action in redeeming the situation. Needless to say, unless there is a rapid improvement in productivity and a serious commitment to rebuilding capacity in all sectors of the Nigerian economy and society, the task of re-initiating development process in the country will be more difficult , if not impossible.

Over the next two decades, the role of knowledge in the development process will become more ramifying. Indeed, it will be virtually impossible for any country to remain on the frontier of development unless its knowledge base is at the frontier. Therefore, a developing country will find it difficult to catch up with the rest of the

world unless it can leapfrog its knowledge base. Research is very central to this process and given the massive deterioration in the capacity of research institutions and, hence, the productivity of researchers in the country during the last two decades, the task of leapfrogging becomes more urgent and challenging at the same time.

With specific reference to economic policy research, it is imperative to quickly rebuild capacity and boost productivity of researchers who must now operate in a dynamic liberalized private sector-led economy where reliance has to be placed on indirect instruments of development management as opposed to the erstwhile direct control measures of the pre-1986 era. Under this circumstance, a strong research capacity and a core of very productive researchers are necessary in order to avoid costly mistakes that can wreak havoc to the economy and society as a whole.

In this paper, therefore, the issues pertinent to productivity and capacity building in the Nigerian research environment are examined with a view to proposing strategies for improving both thereby facilitating the process of leapfrogging the knowledge base which is a prerequisite for catching up with the rest of the world. The rest of the paper is organized as follows. The next section deals with conceptual issues. Specifically, the concepts of research, productivity and capacity building are defined in order to focus attention on the critical attributes of these concepts from the point of view of productivity and capacity building in the Nigerian research environment. Next, features

of the contemporary Nigerian research environment are discussed. On the basis of the contemporary situation of the Nigerian research environment, suggestions for improving productivity and capacity building in the Nigerian research environment are proposed.

II Conceptual Issues

Research is a thorough, scholarly or scientific investigation or inquiry. Two groups of research can be identified, viz, theoretical and applied research. While theoretical research aims at advancing the frontiers of knowledge, applied research aims at giving practical (empirical) content to theoretical constructs. Policy research, which is a sub-set of applied research, aims at ensuring that policy decisions can be based on objective evidence and it is normally addressed to the main actors in the policy making process, namely, the politicians, bureaucrats and special interest groups (Soyibo, 1996; Ajakaiye, 1992 and Ostry, 1991). Accordingly, policy research is the sub-set of applied research that is concerned with the explanation, empirical analysis and prediction of the consequences of changes in policy variables on the variables of the objectives of the policy (Tendulkar, 1991). A typical policy has at least three types of effects, namely, positive and intended effects, positive and unintended effects and negative and normally unintended effects. The purpose of policy research is to identify these three types of effects and suggests measures to reduce, if not eliminate,

the third type of effects while consolidating and improving the first two effects.

Productivity is normally defined as the output per unit of input, i.e., the ratio of output to input. The relevant input of interest depends on the issue at hand. For example, if we are interested in labour productivity then the denominator will be labour measured in a specific unit while if we are interested in capital, then the denominator will be capital input measured in a given unit. In order to improve productivity, i.e., increase the ratio of output to the specific input, there are two basic possibilities. The first is to improve the quality of the relevant input so that for the same quantity of input, more output is possible while the second is to improve the quality of the relevant input so that the same quantity of output can be produced with smaller quantity of input. The option of increasing the quantity of the relevant input so long as the ratio of output to input is increasing is really not directly related to productivity but to economies of scale. In this paper, attention is focused on productivity of researchers and the creation of enabling environment for meaningful research through institutional capacity building for research in Nigeria.

Finally, **capacity**, can be defined in a number of ways. It can be defined simply as the maximum amount that can be contained or the power to learn or retain knowledge, i.e., mental ability. It can also be defined as the position in which one functions. For the present purposes, however, it is instrumental to define capacity as

the ability to perform or produce. According to Obadan and Adubi (1998), **capacity building entails investment in human capital, institutions and practices necessary to enhance human skills, overhaul institutions and improve procedures and the system.** Therefore, capacity building entails improving the ability of human resources and institutions to perform or produce. Capacity building for research therefore entails improving the ability of researchers and research institutions to produce high quality research outputs. Accordingly, capacity building efforts should be directed at the researchers and the research institutions in order to improve productivity of researchers in Nigeria. It is, therefore, pertinent to examine the salient features of the contemporary Nigerian research environment.

II Features of Contemporary Nigerian Economic Policy Research Environment

A salient feature of the contemporary Nigerian research environment is the **shortage of graduates**, especially, economics graduates interested in and competent to carry out high quality research. Foremost, relatively few first degree graduates are eligible to proceed to M.Sc. and Ph.D degrees. Secondly, until recently, many of the qualified first degree holders are not interested in higher degrees because of the low remuneration. In the early years of reckless liberalization of the Nigerian banking industry, many of the high quality graduates considered it irrational to proceed to

higher degrees when the banks were offering them salaries that were multiples of those of their professors. With the collapse of several banks and the associated retrenchments, newly qualified graduates are finding it reasonable to stay in academics. It is, therefore, expected that the shortage of competent higher degree graduates interested in and capable of conducting research should abate somewhat in the foreseeable future.

A second major feature of the contemporary Nigerian research environment is the relatively **low quality** of outputs of many universities. This is due, mainly, to the incessant labour unrest and the associated implications for the university academic programmes and instructional time.

Probably more severe is the **lack of the latest teaching materials**. Foremost, Nigerian academics are not encouraged to write tertiary textbooks based on local knowledge and research because most publishers are not interested in such texts due to low effective demand for them. On the other hand, owing to the massive exchange rate depreciation and the pervasive low purchasing power of the people, **very few students can afford imported textbooks**. The implication is that students have limited access to high quality and up to date materials and information. The **abysmally low level of funding of the universities and research institutes over the last two decades made it difficult for them to stock their libraries** with the

latest international journals which the graduate students should have access to. For the same reason, **research grants** are not only small in size but they have dried up in several institutions. Consequently, research outputs of Nigerian academics are less far below their potential.

A feature of the contemporary research environment is the **limited opportunity for Nigerian researchers to attend international conferences and workshops** where they could network and interact with their counterparts world wide. Again, this is a consequence of limited funding and the massive depreciation of the naira which make international travels unaffordable to the researchers without the support of donors. Arising from the hyper inflationary pressure that had prevailed over the economy during the last two decades and the high cost of transportation within the country, **it has been difficult for researchers to even attend seminars and workshops locally** without the support of international donor agencies.

Another feature of the contemporary Nigerian research environment is the **generally disabling infrastructural facilities**. In this connection, epileptic electricity supply, telecommunications and water supply are severe disabling. Also, the **limited access to computers and Internet connectivity** limit access of the researchers to the latest information and also contribute to the stock of information available world-

wide.

Finally, **management instability** has been identified as one of the features of the Nigerian research environment. According to Idachaba (1998), this explains the high incidence of abandoned research project and/or discontinuation of longitudinal studies as new management seeks to “make a difference” by initiating their own research programmes which are not incremental, complementary or superior to the existing programmes.

IV Suggestions for Improving Productivity and Capacity Building in Nigerian Research Environment

In order to improve productivity of researchers and also build capacity in the Nigerian research environment, it is necessary to invest in the researchers and research institutions. Beginning with investment in researchers, perhaps the first step should be to improve the level of funding of research by the Nigerian authorities and the private sector organizations. The level of funding should be high enough to finance basic, applied and policy research. Since most of the credible applied and policy research depend on extensive primary and secondary data collection activities, the level of funding should be high enough to support travels necessary for this and related purposes. Relatedly, the data collection agencies, especially the Federal Office of Statistics (FOS) and the statistics divisions of the Planning Research and Statistics Departments of the various Ministries should be well funded so that they can generate

reliable and timely data for use by researchers.

Next, the researchers should be supported to regularly attend international and local conferences and seminars where new techniques, issues and initiatives can be discussed. It will also afford them opportunity to network with their colleagues locally and internationally which is very necessary for updating their knowledge and skills. Moreover, there should be opportunity for the researchers to attend training programmes to sharpen their skills and acquire new ones, especially given the rapid rate of progress in technology with its implications for research methodology.

Probably more important is the need to ensure that remuneration of researchers in the research institutions and universities remain attractive so as to prevent massive turnover of staff and its implications for continuity of research programmes. This is also necessary in order to make the pursuit of higher degrees attractive to first degree graduates thereby avoiding chronic shortages of high quality researchers.

Turning to building capacity of the research institutions, perhaps the first step is to equip these institutions properly without which they will be unable to perform or produce. It is impossible and hardly necessary to list the equipment required by research institutes as this will vary depending on the type of research institution. For social science research institute, for example, vehicles and computers are critical inputs. Agricultural science research may need laboratory equipment as well as

tractors and other agricultural machinery.

Another area of institutional capacity building is the improvement of library facilities. In this regard, the stock of library resources should be very current and broad spectrum. Also, the libraries should be networked with their counterparts locally and internationally. The instrumentality of inter-library loans will reduce duplication as well as make a wider range of library resources available to the researchers beyond what is available in their local library. Relatedly, the research institutions should be on the Internet.

Finally, efforts should be made to create enabling research environment by ensuring that critical infrastructural facilities are available and functioning. Specifically, researchers, and indeed, all operators in the Nigerian economy and society should be able to take electricity, telecommunications and water for granted.

Management of the research institutions should be more stable. A situation whereby the leadership of research institutions changed too frequently discourages continuity of research programmes and this should be avoided. In order to promote continuity and orderly restructuring of research programmes, leadership of research institutes should, as far as practicable, be from within the institutions. The temptation to appoint the leadership of these institutions from outside should be resisted.

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