

# Introduction of an annual research day program in the Faculty of Pharmacy, University of Benin, Nigeria

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## Abstract

The University of Benin is a Federal Government owned university located in the south of Nigeria. It currently has 13 faculties which includes the Faculty of Pharmacy. This faculty was one of the first faculties that began its programme when the university was commissioned although it took some years to evolve as a stand-alone faculty. Through the years, there has been a steady decline in the drive for research in the faculty and a number of factors had been identified as possible causes. Of the several interventions through which an active research culture could be revived in the faculty, I identified an open faculty research day as one of the possibilities. I was made the assistant dean of the Faculty in 2016 and with that appointment I became the first ever female assistant dean of the faculty since its inception. The IDC programme provided the drive for me to actualize my plans for a research day through its courses which were geared on management and instituting changes. This assisted me in using my position as assistant dean to actualize a faculty research day. The planning, outcome, benefits, and future suggestions of the first Faculty of Pharmacy Research Day University of Benin, Nigeria are presented. The research day was a huge success and has been ratified by the faculty of pharmacy board of studies to be an annual programme in the faculty.

## 1 Introduction and Background

The Faculty of Pharmacy, University of Benin, Nigeria was established in 1970. Since then, it has gone through several stages of restructuring and currently has six departments of learning. I was an undergraduate student of the Faculty, where I studied for 5 years. I then gained employment as an assistant lecturer into the Faculty in 2003 and have risen through the ranks to my current position of senior lecturer and Assistant Dean. In total, I have spent 21 years in the Faculty (my undergraduate and service years included), and I have observed the research abilities and capacities of the Faculty. In my time so far in the Faculty, there appears to be a declining drive for competitive research which may be a result of several factors. Some of the factors include, poor funding for research, lack of suitable equipment for proper research,

poor mentoring in the system, inadequate knowledge of research funding opportunities, and poor collaborative network with institutions outside the country. My project action plan (PAP) to institute an annual research day program in the Faculty of Pharmacy, was borne out of the need to address the poor research environment I had observed within the Faculty. The opportunity provided for the PAP by IDC enabled me to push through the need to implement an open research day. The discussion that follows will briefly examine the problem and suggestions for improvement. Also included are the PAP process from planning to implementation. The PAP findings will also be highlighted and discussed.

## 2 Problem Statement

In African institutions, existing limitations in the research environment has led to the increased frequency in the frustration of talented researchers. This has been one of the leading contributors to massive brain drain out of Africa (Sawyerr 2004). This can be extended as one of the reasons for the declining research drive in the faculty of pharmacy, University of Benin. Policies and measures that can therefore address the research limitations will lead to increased research.

### Benefits of Increased Research

Increased research leads to increased knowledge which has a number of benefits for the society, such as improved quality of life and increases in domestic production (Sawyerr 2004). Every society should be equipped with the capacity to generate, acquire, adapt, and apply modern knowledge in order to gain the benefits of increased knowledge in the society (Sawyerr 2004). For this vision to materialize, the environment must be adequate to support good quality research and encourage locally relevant research. So, what is the logic underlying a research-active faculty? By being research active, faculty members become well-versed in the scholarly literature on which instruction is to be based, and because of their regular contributions to the discipline, they are considered adequately informed and knowledgeable of the topic (Altbach 2004). By being well-versed in their research, faculty members confidently provide evidence-based teaching, such that the teaching of the next generation is based on the best available research findings. It has been noted that investment in higher education can enhance a country's productivity (Gyimah-Brempong et al. 2006). Therefore, research-active faculty members who engage in applied research contribute to the society at large. Research-active faculty can also contribute to the recruitment of top graduate students, enhanced training of doctoral and master's students, better supervision of dissertations and theses, as well as provide enriched mentorship environments for both undergraduate and graduate education (Darley and Luethge 2015).

### **Building Research Capacity**

With increased and improved research comes increased success in research and increased motivation for research. When research is considered successful, the compliments go to the individual researchers or research teams. It is common knowledge that such success is determined not only by individual brilliance, hard work, and team competencies but is also based on resources available to the researchers. Research capacity, therefore, takes into consideration two major and important components, a human (individual or team) component, and an environmental component both of which can determine the degree of success of researchers (Sawyerr 2004). An open research day can therefore target the human component.

### **Possible Solutions and Benefits**

Research capacity building can be obtained not just from the process of conducting research itself but from formal training such as research days. Therefore an institution that lacks continuous research activity cannot meaningfully speak about research capacity development (Mkandawire 1995).

These problems have led to the production of what is known as third generation of scholars of African origin (Mkandawire 1995). The first generation of African scholars were those educated somewhere in the 1960's who were privileged to be trained with some of the highest standards of learning and were sponsored by their governments both for study at home and study abroad (Mkandawire 1995). The second generation of African scholars are those who trained somewhere between the 1970's and 1980's and had some access to supplemental support for study abroad and at home but the conditions at home were so harsh that those who found opportunities to remain abroad, did so. These formed the generation of brain drain. Then came the third generation of African scholars who were trained from the late 1980's to the present time and got zero to minimal support and had to undertake most of their training at home at a time when the quality of research and the quality of teaching were declining sharply (Mkandawire 1995). One of the major problems identified for poor motivation of African researchers are lack of resources, lack of guidance and support for African authors (Anastassios and Ho 2014).

For research culture to be revived in African institutions, the third generation of scholars should be targeted in a decisive manner. Strategies should involve improving the research environment and capacity development, both institutional and general. The issues of funding, and the improvement of graduate study should also be addressed.

### **Inclusion in institutional policies**

At the institutional level, one of the goals should be the restoration of research to its proper place in the strategic plans. It is, nevertheless, essential to keep emphasizing that, without ongoing research, meaningful research capacity building in Africa is inconceivable; and in the absence of such capacity, the generation and application of new knowledge—the condition for all development will continue to fall short of the

requirements of the 21st century (Sawyer 2004). My PAP was intended to address this by showcasing the benefits of a faculty research day to the university's administration such that an annual faculty research day is ratified and implemented into the University's or faculty's policy. Adequate policies may involve that research should be such that is concept led and related to teaching. Certain topics therefore for capacity development programmes in the Faculty research day can include: research leadership, provision of guidance to staff on opportunities for getting funding for research projects; expertise development on intellectual property and other ethical issues; and how to market research to the public (Association of Commonwealth Universities 2001).

### **Researcher Networks**

An added benefit of an open research day within a faculty is researcher networking. Networking with colleagues has been reported to be vital for career success (Wolff and Moser 2009). Networking promotes exchange of ideas and opens collaboration opportunities which can assist in motivating researchers in our setting to improve research drive.

From the views expressed in the preceding discussion, institution of an annual open faculty research program even in limited resource settings has the potential to stimulate and improve research.

## **3 Project Action Plan to institute an open faculty research day**

The general objective of my PAP included the following:

To institute an annual research day program within the faculty of pharmacy, University of Benin, Nigeria that aims to build and strengthen research capacity within the different departments of the faculty;

The specific objectives of my PAP are as listed:

- a) To motivate researchers within the faculty;
- b) To bring awareness of the faculty's research to companies and interested organizations;
- c) To initiate collaborative inter- and intra- faculty research;
- d) To promote an active research culture;
- e) To highlight research strengths and weakness that can be addressed.
- f) To create an incentive for research;
- g) To promote improved funding for research;
- h) To promote improved mentorship within the faculty

## 4 Methods, Challenges and Implementation

The planning process began with informal notification of the idea to the Dean of the faculty, heads of department and potential committee members. It was also necessary to inform the Deputy Vice Chancellor informally of the idea, the reason behind the idea and the potential benefits. This process took longer than anticipated as it was oftentimes difficult to get meeting appointments with the administrators. Getting the faculty to own the process was not a problem as they were made to realize it was for their overall benefit. As soon as this was achieved and a formal constitution of the committee was released, it was quite fast-paced moving forward. I was made the Chairman of the committee and one key thing that worked was to ensure that the individuals on the team were people who shared similar vision for the program and that they were also people who would commit to the program. Having good people management skills is one primary skill to have and even with that it can still present with its challenges. Learning to manage the twists and turns that arise when managing people while working towards a goal is highly beneficial.

Another challenge was getting the funds to run the project. This was probably the most difficult aspect of planning the program. With shortage of funds for running regular programs in the institution, it was a tall ask to divert funds for the faculty research day which was not part of the University's policies. Fund acquisition eventually became the task of the committee members and it was no easy task. Being the first time the program was being done, requesting for registration fees was ruled out in order to encourage participation. The planning process followed the processes described in Table 1–4 below. With funds coming in from philanthropists and alumni, we began announcements of the program, printing invitation cards, program posters, program booklets, name tags for attendees, and award certificates. We were also able to set aside prize funds for award winners in all categories. Twelve awards were scheduled for the 6 departments in the faculty and included best oral and best poster presentations from each department. Additionally, we budgeted for meals for all attendees and made provision for a generating set in the event of electricity failure.

Another challenge we faced was getting researchers motivated to submit abstracts and participate. We had to fix several deadlines for abstract submissions due to low abstract submissions at the initial stage. This necessitated an intervention which involved scheduling meetings with each department on separate days. In these meetings, all staff and postgraduate students of the respective department were invited and we had to communicate to them the reason and benefits of the open research day using personal experiences. We also invited them to share their fears and concerns to which we responded to. This intervention proved highly successful as we saw an increase in the abstract submissions after each meetings. It is therefore important to have back up plans tailored to the setting should the initial global plan fail.

The day eventually held on the 20<sup>th</sup> of February, 2018. It was well attended and went smoothly. The university administrators praised the event and pledged support

for the top award winners. They also encouraged that the event should henceforth be an annual event. Program evaluation questionnaires were distributed at the end of the program.

The committee met for the last time after the program, to evaluate the program, discuss our strengths, weakness, threats and opportunities. Opportunities for improvement were noted. The final report of the program and planning process was prepared and submitted to the Dean. The report was read at the Faculty Board of studies where the program was ratified as an annual faculty event.

**Table 1:** Key task A of the Project planning

<b>Key task A: Involve the Dean and Heads of Departments</b>	<b>My role?</b>	<b>Who else?</b>	<b>How to measure?</b>
<b>Task 1:</b> Discuss and obtain approval from the Faculty Dean about my PAP	Provide sufficient information to the Dean about my PAP	Dean	Written briefs
<b>Task 2:</b> Meet with Faculty Heads of Department to discuss the project and obtain their support and co-operation for the project	Intimate and discuss the benefits of the PAP with the HODs	Heads of Department	Written briefs
<b>Task 3:</b> Form a 10-man team to deliberate and develop a working plan for the project	Objectively select and recruit willing team members	Selected team members	Memo and minutes

**Table 2:** Key task B of the Project planning

<b>Key task B: Analysis, planning and programme development</b>	<b>My role?</b>	<b>Who else?</b>	<b>How to measure?</b>
<b>Task 1:</b> Gather detailed information about annual research day programs in different universities at home and abroad	Co-ordinate information gathering	Team members	Minutes
<b>Task 2:</b> Discuss and draft a feasible program of activities for the day	Co-ordinate discussions	Team members	Minutes
<b>Task 3:</b> Based on the draft program of activities, discuss and determine the structure of the activities e.g. oral and poster presentations layout, timing for each presentation, judges selection, determine criteria for and number of awards	Co-ordinate discussions	Team members	Minutes, evaluation of drafted programs and suggestions
<b>Task 4:</b> Draft templates for poster and oral presentations, allocate officers in charge for collating each department's submission in preparedness for the day	Co-ordinate discussions	Team members	Minutes, evaluation of drafted programs and suggestions
<b>Task 5:</b> Determine budget, potential sponsors, guests to be invited, hall(s) to be used	Co-ordinate discussion, ensuring that informed selections are made	Team members	Minutes, evaluation of drafted budget and suggestions

**Table 3:** Key task C of the Project planning

<b>Key task C: Finalization and Implementation</b>	<b>My role?</b>	<b>Who else?</b>	<b>How to measure?</b>
<b>Task 1:</b> Finalize program and structure of activities and prepare an official report. Determine a suitable date for the inaugural FOPARD	Co-ordinate discussions and assist in report preparations	Team members	Minutes, assessment of report
<b>Task 2:</b> Present report/draft to the Faculty Dean for approval	Initiate meeting and present report/draft	Team members	Written Minutes
<b>Task 3:</b> Present report to the Deputy Vice Chancellor academic and the Vice Chancellor for approval	Initiate meeting and present report/draft	Team members	Written Minutes
<b>Task 4:</b> Begin announcements, application for sponsorship.	Ensure that activities meet with designated time periods	Team members	Printing and distribution of flyers, announcement, written letters for sponsorship solicitation via mails and SMS messages

**Table 4:** Key task D of the Project planning

<b>Key task D: Reflection on the experience of implementation of the programme</b>	<b>My role?</b>	<b>Who else?</b>	<b>How to measure?</b>
<b>Task 1:</b> Meeting with committee to determine how the assessment of the evaluation forms should proceed	Co-ordinate discussions	Team members	Written Minutes
<b>Task 2:</b> Distribution of evaluation forms among team members for assessment and report	Co-ordinate distribution	Team members	Written Minutes
<b>Task 3:</b> Draft of report summarising outcome of evaluation assessment	Participate and assist in report drafting	Secretarial team members	None
<b>Task 4:</b> Final meeting to finalize report and address other concerns arising from the program including measures to ensure continuity.	Co-ordinate discussions	Team members	Written Minutes
<b>Task 5:</b> Presentation of report to the Dean of the Faculty of Pharmacy	Present report	Team members and the Dean	Written Minutes
<b>Milestone D: Report on evaluation of the programme achieved and presented to the Dean.</b>			

## 5 PAP Findings

The research day involved staff and students of the Faculty of Pharmacy. In attendance were also undergraduate students but they did not participate in research presentations. Staff and postgraduate students in attendance totalled about 85 while undergraduate students present equalled 93. This gave a total of 178 attendees for the research day. Forty (43) research presentations were selected for that day. The event was well attended by the principal officers of the University administration and in attendance were the Vice Chancellor, the Deputy Vice Chancellor Administration and the Librarian. Also in attendance were the heads of Department of the six departments in the Faculty. Also in attendance was a representative from the government of the state (Dr. Tom Obaseki). There were three guest presentations on the topics, Research Grant Writing, Mentorship in Academia and a presentation by an online publisher. Ten (10) awards were disbursed at the end of the event to the best presentations and included 5 awards for oral presentations and 5 awards for poster presentations.

### 5.1 Program Evaluation

The analysis of the research day revealed that about 94.74% of staff agreed that the day led to an increased understanding of research activities across the Faculty while 94.12% of students agreed as well. This shows a large support for the research day.

Faculty staff (49.09%) and students (60.30%) agreed that the day provided opportunities to network and form disciplinary collaboration. The small percentage seen with staff on this point may have been due to the lack of short breaks during the day and maybe because the program was limited to a one day event.

Faculty staff (75.44%) and students (89.70%) agreed that the day improved communication and helped to build the research community within the Faculty. This again shows the support for the research day and an understanding of the benefits the day brings for research communication.

Assessment also revealed that Faculty staff (61.56%) and students (89.49%) agreed the 'awards' initiative will motivate research in the Faculty. This also supports the continued use of awards in the research day.

Overall 87.74% of staff and 85.29% of students found the day enjoyable with 92.98% of staff and 86.76% of students agreeing for more research focus in subsequent programs and 84.21% of staff and 88.24% of students requesting for a booklet on researchers profile in future programs.

### 5.2 Guest Lecture Evaluation

Assessment showed that 91.88% of respondents agreed that the topics chosen were adequate and 85.70% agreed that the speakers were motivating. This highlights the desire of Faculty staff and students to improve on mentoring and grant writing. Respondents additionally suggested inclusion or elaboration of the following topics in future programs: mentorship, strategic planning, challenges of research and teamwork. There was also a suggestion to invite guest speakers outside the faculty.

### 5.3 Research presentation evaluation

Regarding research presentations made on the day, it was suggested that the number of oral presentations be reduced and more time provided to presenters. It was also suggested that undergraduate students be allowed to make presentations. Respondents overall considered the lectures and the research presentations as highlights of the day.

### 5.4 Registration Fee

Respondents were asked if they would be willing to pay a registration fee to improve the program and 42.09% of staff agreed while 50% of students agreed. This shows the poor willingness to support the program financially overall but more from the faculty staff.

### 5.5 Other suggestions for Improvement

Respondents had the following suggestions for improvement of the research day: exhibition section to showcase the Faculty's research products, more pharmaceutical companies be invited, the event be open to other faculties, and the event be scheduled for two days or one week instead of one day.

## 6 Conclusion

Researchers in my institution clearly are 'hungry' for research improvement and institutions must strive to improve and develop their researchers as well as the conditions in which they work. This implies that there is a dire need for the provision of an enabling environment for researchers in African institutions. One step forward is utilizing and maximizing what is possible under the current research conditions. Activities such as research days can assist to help researchers concentrate and focus on what is achievable under the current circumstances that can likely yield the most effective results. Funds for the open research day are an important consideration. It is suggested that some funds be made available by the PAP initiators (DAAD and DIES) to assist in the implementation of such new programs. Overall, the PAP provided a means and a drive to make relevant changes in my faculty and develop the idea of an open research day which would have remained as just an idea.

### Acknowledgement

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