

DOING RESEARCH AND THE CHALLENGES TO ACADEMIC RESEARCH UTILISATION AND IMPLEMENTATION IN NIGERIA

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Abstract

The pursuit of security, technological advancement and economic growth submerges in robust application of innovative, scientific and social discoveries through research. But in Nigeria, like in other developing economies, poor attitude and a disconnection between academic research findings and policy makers seems to becloud efforts germane to development. Situations that researchers dissipate scarce resources and energy in rigorous research only for the findings to be abandoned in the shelf are disastrous. The challenges to research utilisation are manifest in the lack of capacity and the willingness of some policy makers to use research, the communication gap between researchers, donors and policymakers, the management of the political process of policy formulation and implementation of research findings, limited research funding and resistance to change. Theoretically, the strands of planned behaviour theory are very descriptive of the essence of this paper. Against this ambience, capacity building, packaging of research findings, targeted research, improved communication and dialogue, re-orientation of policy makers are expedient strategies.

Key words: *Academic research, utilisation challenges, planned behaviour, policy-makers, and expedient strategies*

Introduction

One of the best measures of scientific progress in a country is the research situation in their scientific communities. Therefore, the concern over conducting scientific and accurate research has increased in most countries, both industrial and developing. This trend may be due to the desire to resolve the health care problems in their communities, to devise new and workable measure to enhance security architecture, to advance technologically, to improve its economic outlook and to establish independence from other countries or to compete with them.

Research is a systematic process to achieve new knowledge, science or invention by the use standard methods. The attitude to research stems from the researchers' curiosity and interest in a particular subject or their wish to solve a problem within a community (Khan, Khan & Iqbal, 2009).

Adequate knowledge of the subject-matter and awareness of research principles are essential prerequisites for any study. Research is an on-going activity in the academic fields, involving the sciences, bio-medical sciences, environmental

sciences, engineering, behavioural and social sciences, , among others. These fields make use of experimentation, draw conclusion of an event based on due process of facts testing, observation and conformity to existing process or procedures (Ukoka & Awak, 2015; Awak, 2013).

Research in both social and natural sciences are devoid of negative psychological components such as subjectivity, personal impression, emotions and reactions of the researchers which can mar the outcome of the research results. Instead, the scientific foundation of most of these researches demands that both the researcher and the processes of conducting the study should be overly objective, factual, and that data are obtained through rigorous observation of variables. The final report is presented in the form of field research reports, summaries, and reviews of research case analysis or research papers with a view to adaptation and implementation.

Indeed, researchers use information about aspects of the different areas of the world as support for or a constraint upon their explanations.

The acceptability of explanation is strongly influenced by the quality of the information or data on which they are based (Ukoka & Awak, 2015; Awak, 2013). If the data are plucked capriciously and haphazardly from here and there, then the explanations will be questioned. According to Halfpenny (1983), research methods as a topic covers all ways of systematically collecting and analysing data. It is only methodical research that enables people to assess precisely and exercise confidence in the explanations for which the data provide evidence.

Ritter (2009) has opined that the most frequent sources of deriving knowledge was seeking advice from an expert and consulting technical reports. It also includes accessing the internet, using statistical data and consulting policy makers in other jurisdictions; while the least frequently adopted sources were academic literature, relying on internal expertise, policy documents and employing a consultant.

It is obvious that in most cases, researchers do not consider the sources of findings that policy makers utilised in the policy making process. To Ritter (2009), research is only one of several sources of information drawn upon when making decisions. Therefore, it is expedient to appreciate the influence that key personnel wield as indisputable factors in the decision-making process. The influential personnel make decisions based on either common sense or expert opinion or by acting as a filter through which substantiation is transferred. Thus, a collaborative effort of all the major players in the decision-making process must converge, knowing that research findings are only seen to affect policy with the support and commitment of those who have influence for change (El-Jardali, Lavis, Ataya & Jamal, 2012).

After energy has been exasperated through research rigors, what becomes of the research findings has been a source of concern, as there is seeming disparaging affinity between researchers and policy makers. This is evident by the fact that

mass volume of research findings are churned out by many researchers with a view to addressing perennial problems of insecurity, stunted economic growth and technological backwardness in most of the developing countries including Nigeria, but the reality remains bleak. Where are the reports and why are they incapable of contributing to national discourse? Is there a mismatch between researchers' intents and those of the policy makers? Is this dissociation caused by inhibitors such as attitude to research, authenticity of research report, and general challenges to research utilisation? Providing answers to these questions is the essence of this Paper.

The problem

To Wallace, Nwosu and Clarke (2012), lack of awareness, access, familiarity, usefulness, and motivation affect the possibility and frequency of adoption of research findings in decision-making processes. Decision makers are not sensitive to the incentives that drive researchers like attracting grant money and publishing in peer-reviewed journals, while not responding to any topical issue such as recession, technological backwardness and security challenges that may confront government policy makers. There is also, poor research - to - policy linkages, and policymakers, lack of high-quality research, policy formulators and implementing personnel. The existence of misinformation and disinformation, lack of access to funds and enabling environment for research to thrive have continued to impress upon the essence of research in overall national development agenda.

Research Methods

Research methods have extensive coverage that describes all the procedures and techniques used by researchers to gather and analyze data. Research procedure is a sequence of activities which when followed, will enable the researcher to achieve goals (Awak, 2013). Research methodology enables researchers to focus their thought and action on their investigation and

improve or maximise the chances of reasoned conclusion as objectively as possible. A sound scientific method is rooted in empirical proof and logical reasoning, which is capable of yielding the same or with little variation with the previous result when other researchers replicate it (Ukoka & Awak, 2015). When designing research and deciding which method to use, Halfpenny (1983), asserts that there are considerations to be given thoughts of, and these considerations fall into the following:

- a. What is the researcher's standpoint in relations to the research? Is the researcher going into the field to carry out the research, evaluate the research done by other people, or commission someone else to do the research?
- b. What is the strategy that the researcher is going to adopt: A case study, a sample survey or an experiment?
- c. What techniques is the researcher going to use to collect and analyse data? For instance, will it be an observation or an interview study? Will the data be quantified and statistically analysed or used raw in illustrative quotations or description?

It is pertinent to evaluate these areas for specifics:

Doing Research: If the researchers are the ones doing research without commissioning anyone else, they have to be adept at many of the specific techniques of data collection and analysis, described as acceptable standard anywhere. Additionally, and equally as important, are the skills of always being able to think of alternative ways of proceeding. For a good research is a research done imaginatively, not blindly according to some recipe. Imaginative research is a research done with critical awareness of what alternative ways there are of doing it. It involves taking into consideration the available advantages/disadvantages of each alternative as well as critically assessing the need/ reasons that could inform the adoption of each method or why the researcher is conducting the research the way it is done.

Evaluating Research: If the researcher is evaluating existing research done by other people in the area of interest; the preliminary stage is to organise a literature search to make sure that he has located all the significant works. It constitutes only a tiny fragment of the whole research literature including all published books, journal articles/periodicals, government official publications and unpublished materials.

Commissioning Research: If the researcher is commissioning the research from other people, whether through formal contract or through informal assistance, it is important always to remember that these people's interests in the research might be different from the researcher's own. At best, it might simply be that they have slightly different understanding of the main concepts that informed the research. However, different standpoints are linked in several ways in that the three things can take place inclusively such that the researcher evaluates, does research and also commissions other people to do it.

Research Strategy: A research strategy is a general plan of action, an overall design of the way the research is to be conducted. There are broadly two ways in which research strategies vary: in terms of cases and characteristics and in terms of the timing of data manipulation. To Galliers (1991), some of the methodologies include laboratory experiments, field experiments, surveys, action research, case studies, theorem proof, descriptive/interpretive research, forecasting futures research and simulation.

Research Technique: Techniques are the detailed procedures used for collecting and analyzing data. They include observing, interviewing, and content analysis of documents, questionnaires, participant observation, fieldwork note-taking, coding, editing and statistical operations on qualitative data, filtering qualitative data and so on.

Research Design: This is the framework for carrying out research study. It is a plan of action on how the identified problems and proposed

hypotheses will be verified. It sets the research activity on motion and directs the way on how each turning point in the course of the study shall be made. The design serves as the model upon which the framework of the study is built. It provides for the research questions to be answered through appropriate application of the research hypotheses and when these hypotheses are answered, it means that the research was on the right course and this is usually supported by data gathered from the field. In sum, research design provides the glue that holds the research project together. A design is used to structure the research, to show how all of the major parts of the research project - the samples or groups, measures, treatments or programmes, and methods of assignment - work together in an effort to address the central research questions.

Steps involved in the conduct of Research

Scientific method serves as the way through which organised and authenticated knowledge derived, are actually validated through verification. The methods are the most articulate ways of getting data and process it to a useful state. It is systematic because it has an in-built mechanism that guides the researcher throughout the whole process and it could as well serve to effect some corrections where necessary.

According to Ibanga (1992), the steps include:

- i. problem identification
- ii. theoretical frame of reference including literature review
- iii. study objectives, statement of hypothesis
- iv. research design and sampling
- v. measurement, operationalization, instrumentation and data collection
- vi. data analysis, data presentation and computations
- vii. interpretation of findings
- viii. theoretical discussions
- ix. policy implication

These could be delineated into three main categories such that steps i - iii fall within the 'theoretical' stage of the study; steps iv - vi are

called 'methodology', while the last three steps, vii - ix are 'findings'. This classification helps a researcher to strictly focus on the work. But just how strictly and objectively does a researcher abide by them?

The Problem of value-laden research

Objectivity connotes the conclusion arrived at as the result of inquiry and investigation are independent of the race, creed, occupation, nationality, religion, moral preference, and political predispositions of the investigator. If the research is truly objective, it is independent of any subjective elements; any personal desires that the researcher may have. However, the view that some areas of research are ideologically based has contributed to the assertion that value may affect the result of research if not handled properly because scientists cannot shed their taken-for-granted assumptions, prejudices and commitments. They cannot escape from the past experiences, which will colour everything they see. This has influenced the entire process of research whether in natural or social sciences. They also shape the researchers' assumptions about the nature of social reality, the methods of data collection, the type of data considered appropriate for the study, the way data are analysed and interpretation of the result.

Supporting this view, Phillips (1971 in Awak, 2013) observes that an investigator's values influence not only the problems he selects for study, but also his methods for studying them and the sources of data he uses. As noted by Awak (2013), many researchers, sometimes impose their own views of reality on the social world by way of conceptualisation, interpretation, among others. As a result, they distort and misrepresent the very reality they seek to understand. Research techniques such as interviews, questionnaires and surveys are a part of this process of distortion depending on how they are handled. They come between the researcher and the social world and so remove any opportunity

the researcher might have had of discovering social reality.

Little systematic research has been directed to the effects of the language in which questionnaires are phrased and interviews conducted, which would have produced greater knowledge of the research process and may help to control or even eliminate sources of bias and invalidity (Reynolds, 1982).

But sometimes, data are influenced by the context of the interviewer, the interaction of the participants, and their definition of the situation among other things. Therefore, if interview data are actually examined beyond face-value, some degree of biases would be revealed. Hence, there is no such thing as the respondents' real, true attitudes because in an interview, as in the real world, his responses are a product of the particular context of interaction.

Investigations into research procedures might provide insights into meanings, which govern the actions of the respondents. However, they will not resolve the problem of validity. Data, which result from human interaction, are inevitably biased in one way or the other, simply because of the nature of interaction.

Theoretical Disposition: Theory of Planned Behaviour by Icek Ajzen (1985, 1991)

The premise of the theory is that individuals make rational decisions to engage in specific action based on their own beliefs about the behaviours and expectation of a positive outcome after having engaged in the behaviours. Ajzen (2002), defines intention as "...indications of how hard people are willing to try, of how much of an effort they are planning to exert, in order to perform the behaviour" (p. 113). The theorist stated that an intention to perform a certain pattern of behaviour is determined by three components such as attitude, subjective norm and perceived behavioural control.

Attitude in the theory is conceived as "a disposition to respond favourably or unfavourably to an object, person, institution, or event." (p. 4). Subjective norm portrays the individual's perception that

'significant other' (such as relatives, friend, or colleagues and other individuals who are important to the respondent) believe the respondent should perform the behaviour of interest affects intentions. The perceived importance or relevance of the significant other affects the extent to which their approval will shape intentions. Furthermore, these weightings might vary across contexts. For instance, the beliefs of relatives are likely to shape the intentions to engage in behaviours that relate to family life. In contrast, the beliefs of managers might be more likely to shape the intentions to engage in behaviours that relate to work life, either positively or negatively. The last component, which is, perceived behavioural control is the "perceived ease of performing the behaviour based on past experience and anticipated impediments" (p. 132). In the aggregate, these components directly influence an individual's intention to complete a behaviour, and intention in turn, influences whether an individual ultimately engages in the behaviour or not. The extent to which the individual's perception of behavioural control is in agreement with actual behavioural control, Ajzen (1991) postulated that perceived behavioural control serves as a proxy for actual behavioural control, therefore having a direct influence on both intention and the actual behaviour.

Despite substantial support for the theory as a means of predicting behaviour, research continues to examine additional variables that might enhance its predictive capabilities in certain circumstances. This is depicted by the assertion of Armitage and Conner (1999) that correlations between moral norms and other constructs of the theory were large, and that moral norms might play an important role in the theory. Beck and Ajzen (1991) found that moral obligation provided modest gains in the predictive power of the theory of planned behaviour.

Criminological and psychological theories have been applied with a view to understanding a range of competing economic dishonest behaviour. Ariely (2012) highlights the role of rationalisations, conflicts of interest, creativity, engaging in the first dishonest act, ego-depletion, benefit to others,

observing the dishonest behaviour of others and culture as the factors shaping dishonest behaviour across contexts. Among these theories, the theory of planned behaviour has consistently possess good explanatory power across layers of behaviour, be it health, social, technological or economic (Armitage & Conner, 2001) and is sufficient to predicting engagement in academic research underutilisation. The modified theory of planned behaviour is a framework that serves as an empirical roadmap for educators, researchers, policymakers and others interested in developing interventions geared towards encouraging research uptake by policy makers and maximum utilisation of findings for the good of the society.

Challenges to Research Utilisation

The challenges to research utilisation in the areas of security, technology and economic growth are manifest in the lack of capacity of policy makers to demand and to uptake research, the communication gap between researchers, donors and policymakers, the management of the political process of policy formulation and implementation of research findings, the lack of willingness of some policy makers to use research, the limited research funding and the resistance to change. These factors, for the purpose of this paper are encapsulated into attitudes to research and the disconnect between researchers and policy makers.

Attitudes to Research

The attitudes of people of the world towards research differ and vary considerably. Society and governments can be classified into two major groups in terms of their attitude to research: (a) encouraging research and (b) discouraging or repressing research. Let's discuss the two as follows:

(a) Encouraging Research: This could be as a result of vested interests in the anticipated findings. Individuals, companies and governments as well as NGOs and MNCs spend huge amount of money on research whenever a problem arises in the environment.

Giving encouragement to research could be a reflection of the importance that society attaches to a specific problem. Research could be tackled using multi-disciplinary approach. Example, oil companies could provide funds for research aimed at discovering anti-corrosive agents that would help in the control of oil spillage or it could be a research to discovering ways of treatment to reduce HIV/AIDS pandemic, cholera outbreak, Swine flu, among others.

(b) Repressing Research: This is also a factor of vested interests. Some people are afraid or distrustful of new ideas or objects that are capable of affecting their privileged positions. To such people, change is undesirable and unnecessary.

Again, some people tend to ridicule research out of sheer ignorance or a misguided belief that further advances in scientific knowledge are not possible or just their disdain for technical jargons and statistical figures. Example, funds could be provided for research to discover new ways of conducting free, fair and transparent elections in Nigeria, which may involve the application of electronic voting system. This type of research is likely to be repressed by some politicians who would want the manual system of voting to persist, irrespective of all the anomalies associated with that method.

The Disconnect between Researchers and Policy Makers

Where due diligence is applied by some researchers, the gap between research, policy and practice is still very wide, especially in developing economies, then one wonders what would happen in situations where misconduct beclouds the essence of doing research. The adaptation and acceptability of high-quality research evidence by decision makers has created a gulf between research and policy. Although, researchers have devoted much time and energy to talking about bridging the gap between research and decision making, yet significant gaps still exist between the two. This is why Lomas (1997) has asserted that

there are four misunderstandings between the evidence production and the policy-making effort.

The above deposition is buttressed by the fact that researchers and policy makers consider each other's activity as generating products instead of engaging in processes; scientific research streamlines questions that can provoke a clear and crisp answer, whereas, policy making take other variables such as interests, ideology, values, or opinions into consideration. In addition, decision makers are not sensitive to the incentives that drive researchers like attracting grant money and publishing in peer-reviewed journals, while not responding to any topical issue such as recession, technological backwardness and security challenges that may confront the government policy makers. Again, researchers rarely take into account the different strata of the population that would be audiences for their research.

Other researchers have also stated that one of the reasons for the gap is because policy makers rarely convey clear messages about the policy challenges they face in their specific context to allow for timely and appropriate research agendas, and researchers on the other hand, often produce scientific evidence that is not always tailor-made for application in different contexts (WHO, 2004). Other common obstacles in this regard are centralised decision making and a policy making culture that gives little importance to evidence based findings (Koon, Rao, Tran & Abdu, 2013).

In Nigeria, the use of research findings by policy makers and communities has been described as very limited and challenging and can be explained by the lack of communication between researchers and policy makers, as well as lack of involvement of policy makers and the community in determining the research to be done (COHRED, 2009).

Again, the research-to-policy linkages, based on apparent reality, are ignominious. Some factors have been cited for the low uptake of research by Nigerian policymakers including:

- (i) lack of high-quality research;
- (ii) Findings fraught with misconduct;

- (iii) Generally weak and unreliable research institutions and think tanks; and
- (iv) Apparent disconnect between researchers and policymakers.

There is little interaction between policymakers and researchers; hence, meaningful discussion of available research findings, their suitability to policy-related problems, and identification of other policy areas requiring research attention are severely lacking (Obadan & Uga, 2002).

Although, some innovative efforts have been made to bridge the gap between researchers and policy makers (Uneke, Ezeoha, Ndukwe, Oyibo & Onwe, 2012), such efforts concentrate on short term and are overly haphazard in approach such as a day seminar or workshop without appropriate follow-up.

Research organisations serve a useful function of linking policy makers, yet the work of these organisations is sometimes, not fully appreciated by policymakers either because researchers do not fully understand the policy process or do not know how to communicate effectively their research findings to policymakers.

Therefore, in the face of these daunting challenges, it is difficult to think of a country that would harness academic research for security, technological advancement and economic growth without first understanding how research is done, the motive for doing the research, the prospects of the research findings and the interaction between researchers and policy makers.

Conclusion

Research methods have extensive coverage that describes all the procedures and techniques used by researchers to gather and analyse data. Research procedure is a sequence of activities which when followed, will enable the researcher to achieve goals. Research methodology enables researchers to focus their thought and action on their investigation and improve or maximize the chances of reasoned conclusion as objectively as possible. A sound scientific method is rooted in empirical proof and logical reasoning, which is capable of yielding the same or with little variation

with the previous result when other researchers replicate it. Therefore, researcher's standpoint, strategy and techniques are very important when designing research and deciding the method to use that will guarantee objective research.

For meaningful application of research findings, a strong synergy between researchers, academic institutions and policy makers must be established; devoid of politics of policy formulation and adoption. Attitude to research must change for the better, and central to all research endeavours, should be problem-focused research with peculiar approaches within local context, with a view to devising workable schemas to deal with issues of security, technology and economic growth in Nigeria.

Recommendations

Some expedient strategies have been suggested including:

- Corroborating Innvaer, Vist, Trommald, Oxman's (2002) assertion, promotion of effective interaction between researchers and policymakers should be encouraged and pursued.
- Administrative interventions should include setting up agencies that formulate policies on responsible conduct of research.
- Furthermore, one intervention that deserves consideration is adequate research funding. Lack or inadequate funding appears to create a setting for unwholesome practices such as weak research designs, inadequate data collection and record keeping.
- Best practice response to support ethical research should be encouraged
- Targeted research aimed at the needs of decision makers, where key messages are highlighted, and capacity is built in the area of knowledge translation is needful. This is in line with the observation of orton, Lioyd - Williams, Taylor – Robinson, O` Flaherty and Cape Well (2011).
- Correct packaging of research findings is important as policy makers prefer to have information in a brief format so that they can review it quickly and if relevant, would consider more information.
- Capacity building is a necessity since it instigates researchers' abilities to produce and effectively disseminate research findings to decision makers (Kiefer, Frank, Di Ruggiero, Dobbins & Manuel, 2005); just as it is geared towards improving policy makers' abilities to critically appraise and interpret the outputs (Asthana & Halliday, 2006).
- There is need for improved communication and sustained dialogue between researchers and end users of research.
- Policy makers can be oriented on how to use research findings especially systematic reviews as they effectively summarise findings and increase confidence through critical appraisal (Dobbins, Cockerill & Barnsley, 2001).
- There is also need to change the culture within which policy makers work, such as structures, rewards and training so that more value is placed on the use of research findings for decisions as this might encourage its application.
- The integration of research findings into policy and communicating research findings to Nigerian policymakers is necessary if improved policy decisions are to be adopted, especially within the context of development. It requires a deep understanding of how to interact with policymakers, what information they require, and in what form and with whom to establish interactions.
- Interpersonal relationship and trust, and good networks are helpful ways of strengthening the relationship between researchers, policy makers and practitioners.

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