

Research projects and capacity building

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Abstract

A World Bank long-term perspective study on Sub-Saharan Africa highlighted the need to build human and institutional capacity in virtually all sectors and countries. In South Africa, establishment of a democratic government in 1994 saw increased emphasis placed on capacity building. This led to the revision of policies and legislation directing human resources development. This emphasis on capacity development is reflected in procurement policies to the extent that it is increasingly difficult to successfully bid for funding from government and parastatal organisations unless there is both a plan and a commitment to capacity building in the previously marginalised sectors. There are currently no guidelines to support researchers in their attempts to support the intentions of legislation and policy. It has been assumed that researchers have the understanding and expertise to effectively promote capacity building. Under such conditions the expectations of research administrators are neither clearly structured nor are they understood by researchers. Not surprisingly, researchers often fail to meet the expectations of administrators. In an attempt to contribute towards developing a structured approach, this paper interprets what is meant by capacity building in the context of research projects. Based on this interpretation, reasonable and unreasonable expectations with respect to the extent to which capacity building can be achieved within a given project duration are discussed. A model is suggested, which would improve understanding and delivery and in doing so, achieve better congruence between expectations and outcomes.

Keywords: capacity building, research, change, performance, innovation

Introduction

A long-term perspective study (World Bank, 1991) has highlighted the need to build human and institutional capacity in virtually all sectors and countries in Sub-Saharan Africa. This need is exacerbated by the rapid rate of change in technology that increases the challenge of acquiring the knowledge and skills that enhance ability and capacity to adapt to change (Senge, 1990; Barth and Bartenstein, 1998; Davenport et al., 1998; Senge et al., 1999). It is against this appreciation of the need for capacity that the Foundation for Research Development (FRD, now the National Research Foundation, or NRF), established in 1984, was charged with the responsibility of promoting research and developing research capacity. In an effort to include people from disadvantaged backgrounds and institutions, it introduced the Research Development Programme in 1986. This was followed by the University Development Programme in 1992 and the Institutional Research and Development Programme in 1995.

Establishment of a democratic government in South Africa in 1994 saw increased emphasis placed on capacity building. This led to revision of approaches to research development (DACST, 1996a; b; Department of Education, 1995; South African Qualifications Authority, 2000; South African Government, 2000). The Water Research Commission (WRC), for example, requires researchers to specifically address capacity building in research proposals (Water Research Commission, 2000) and has also set up The Research Partnership Fund to promote research capacity building at historically disadvantaged universities and universities of technology.

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Received 19 April 2004; accepted in revised form 10 August 2004.

Since the inception of these programs, the organisations concerned with research development have made significant advances in terms of defining critical elements in the development of research capacity. This progress is reflected in existing policies, strategies and guidelines around capacity building in research. However, these guidelines do not indicate how researchers should engage capacity building as a process at the level of the research project. Nor have the expectations they have of researchers been clearly articulated. Recent revisions of policy in the Southern African Development Community (SADC, 2000) and in South Africa reflect appreciation for the imperatives of integrated water resource management incorporating a shift in emphasis from supply to demand management. Since success in achieving equitable, efficient and sustainable use of limited water resources in the region is critically dependent upon informed stakeholders, strong emphasis is placed on capacity building in these policies.

Against this background, the WRC supported a research project (Van Wilgen et al., 2003) aimed at developing protocols for improving catchment management through enhanced stakeholder participation. The special emphasis on capacity building in this project and the funder's requirement for capacity building and for reporting on related progress, led the authors to seek improved understanding of how capacity building can be achieved in research projects. While the principal pathway of the project proceeded, the research team explored the theoretical underpinnings of capacity building as a parallel process. The intention was to propose a framework which would improve understanding and delivery and, in doing so, achieve better congruence between expectations and outcomes relating to capacity building in research projects.

This paper presents the results of our investigations and should be interpreted as a first step towards improving understanding of the contribution research projects make to capacity building.