Strategic Project Management in Nigerian Public Research Organisations: The Gap in Practice

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ABSTRACT
The aim of this study was to assess the application of strategic project management (SPM) in Nigerian public research organisations. A case study approach involving four R and D organisations in Nigeria was used. A total of 213 questionnaires were retrieved and these were analysed using quantitative research software, SPSS version 21. The results revealed that 95 per cent of respondents acknowledged that projects executed by public research organisations were planned, but the conventional project management practices were used instead of strategic project management (SPM) principles. In addition, it was found that the level of implementation of the project management practices were also inadequately implemented as such affected the organisation’s performance adversely. As established in this study, the concept of strategy is changing and to address the factors that affect research and development project implementation, senior project practitioners need to pay more attention to strategic, operational and project risks.

KEYWORDS
Project Management, Project Strategy, Projects, Public Research Organisation, Research and Development (R&D), Strategic Project Management

INTRODUCTION
In today’s highly competitive environment, project management has become a critical activity in most modern organisations, requiring new and improved method of management and technical skills, hence the need for the application of project management as a strategic tool (Wessels, 2007). The concept of strategy has gained a lot of attention in recent times, yet strategies frequently fail not because of inadequate formulation but rather due to insufficient strategic implementation (Hrebiniak, 2006). The strategic project management has been found to combine organisation strategy and project management principles (Grundy & Brown, 2002). Most organisations start with the development of a strategic plan, but this alone is not enough? Today many public research organisations have failed in the implementation of their strategic plan formulated for efficient execution of R&D projects (Siyanbola et al., 2012). A strategic project management plan that is well formulated will enhance the organisation performance when they are implemented successfully (Resch, 2011). The strategy literature claims that between 50 per cent and 80 per cent of strategy implementation efforts fail (Ashkenas & Francis, 2000; Beer & Nohria, 2000; Carlopio & Harvey, 2012; Jonk & Ungerath, 2006; Raps, 2004; Atkinson, 2006). Also according to Bell, et al. (2010), strategy execution is commonly

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the most complicated and time consuming part of strategic management, while strategy formulation is primarily an intellectual and creative act involving analysis and synthesis. As evidenced from the reviewed literature, numerous studies suggested that strategies frequently fail not because of inadequate formulation, but because of deficient implementation (Hrebiniak, 2006; Allio, 2005). The efficient management of projects in an organisation, therefore, contributes to its sustainable competitive advantage. When this is not attained, affects the organisation’s performance adversely. Although this is a far-reaching issue with respect to developing innovations for development, especially in developing countries like Nigeria, not many research reports can be found in the literature of providing scientific evidence or otherwise of it.

For organisations to achieve a competitive advantage, the selection and prioritisation of projects have a part to play. SPM, therefore, helps in the prioritisation of projects by executing those projects that will address the organisational strategy and add to the competitive advantage. According to the report from Standish Group (2009), a number of organisations do not achieve the set goals in the execution of their projects, among them, the completion of the project in the predicted time, within the budget and the agreed quality. On the other hand, a more serious problem seems to be that many of them fail to achieve business goals or its set objectives, while it is commonplace that the desired results fail to be achieved (The Standish Group Report, 2009). The purpose of this paper, therefore, was to examine problems being faced by senior project practitioners in Nigeria in the execution of R&D projects, and to propose solutions on how strategic project management can be employed to enhance the performance of public research organisations. The next section presents a detailed review of literature of public research organisations, research and development projects, and strategic project management. This is followed by an explanation of the method employed to achieve the research aim. The subsequent section presents discussion and the findings.

PUBLIC RESEARCH ORGANISATIONS

Public research organisations have been identified to have a wider role in innovation system than merely providing new technologies to individual businesses (Arnold et al., 2012). They provide access to skilled personnel, assist business with short-term problem solving, support the development of research and innovation capabilities through collaborative working and provide access to new ideas and concepts (Arnold et al., 2012). Globally, in the last decades despite the predominant role of block grant and direct transfers, governments have put more emphasis on competitive and programme funding as a way to steer research and implement priorities, although government funding still represent the highest share of public financing for public research organisations (Olsson & Cooke, 2013). This trend has raised some concerns on behalf of public research organisations with regards to their long-term capabilities to address frontier and fundamental research or to provide independent advice to governments (Nedeva & Boden, 2006).

In Nigeria, the public research organisations occupy an explicable prominent, and indeed the central focal point in current thinking and planning about the future of the country. Nigeria is a country naturally endowed with abundant material and human resources, and to fully maximise and transform these natural resources to wealth through value addition, there is the need for a well-articulated R&D that will ensure that the technological innovations required for development are available. To achieve this, the public research organisations in Nigeria are faced with a critical role to advance the technological innovation and economic growth of the nation. The term public research organisation refers to the government-owned research organisations that engage in research and development with
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