

NPHI BEST PRACTICES SERIES: MENTORSHIP

CASE STUDY: NIGERIAN INSTITUTE OF MEDICAL RESEARCH (NIMR)

THE PROBLEM

In the early 2000s, the Nigerian Institute of Medical Research (NIMR) was known for its high-quality research. However, junior-level staff were not progressing in their careers to the extent desired.

THE SOLUTION

In 2003, NIMR Director-General Oni Idigbe instituted a mentorship and training program aimed at helping early career staff develop and improve their research. He enlisted senior-level scientists in the professional development of their junior counterparts, with a goal of sustainable development of NIMR's human and research capacity.



DEVELOPING A CULTURE OF MENTORSHIP

NIMR developed policies and training initiatives to institutionalize a culture of mentorship by engaging both senior scientists and early-career staff.

- **Mentor-mentee partnerships** - All junior scientists at NIMR are required to acquire postgraduate degrees within the time limits of their employment. Once enrolled in a masters- or doctoral-level program at an affiliated university, junior scientists are required to 1) have a mentor-advisor from their department at NIMR in addition to a university advisor, and 2) select a postgraduate research project that contributes to NIMR's work.

NIMR department heads are in turn required to identify potential postgraduate research projects for their junior staff that would contribute to the work of their departments and to the mission of the institute. Once projects are selected, a senior researcher is identified to serve as NIMR mentor to the designated junior staff member (mentee). The partnerships are designed to help early-career staff develop and improve the quality of their research and their research profile, standing, and strategies through 1) targeted training activities at the institutional level, and 2) one-on-one interaction and coaching.

NPHI BEST PRACTICES SERIES: MENTORSHIP

- **Targeted training activities** - NIMR convenes monthly scientific meetings during which mentees are required to present their ongoing work to the entire staff of the institute for comment. In addition to providing guidance on the progress of research, the meetings help train mentees in the art of scientific presentation. Mentees are also required to attend periodic presentations by senior research/scientific staff to learn from more experienced colleagues.

Twice a year, NIMR sponsors training programs for mentees on scientific writing, scientific presentation, grant writing, research methodology, data management, and research ethics. In addition, NIMR conducts annual training in mentorship for all staff using modules adapted from established mentorship training programs. Copies of the modules are provided to all staff for regular review and reference.

- **One-on-one mentoring** – Mentor-mentee pairs are free to structure their relationships according to their agreed-upon goals. Mentors are encouraged to draw on their own expertise to help the mentee develop a research strategy, plan, and targets. Activities typically include helping monitor achievement of targets and outcomes, acting as a sounding board and exploring ideas and issues arising from the research, commenting on draft manuscripts for publication, providing guidance on funding opportunities, and developing plans for career progression.

The mentor-mentee relationships are encouraged to extend beyond research projects to include the personal development of the mentees. Although the formal mentoring partnerships end with the mentees' attainment of an academic degree, the informal relationships often continue, with mentors providing ongoing guidance and advice on career progression and personal and professional development

IMPACT

Since its inception in 2003, the NIMR mentorship and training program has contributed significantly to the development of the Institute's workforce and retention of staff with minimal brain drain (staff attrition). More than 20 staff members have obtained either masters- or doctoral-level degrees through the mentorship initiative. In addition, the research capacities of staff have been greatly enhanced.

The program is noteworthy for its sustainability. By creating and supporting a culture of mentorship, the program has

NIMR Mentorship Training Program: Training Modules

- 1 Overview of mentorship
- 2 Ground rules & guidelines for establishing mentorship programs
- 3 Formal, ethical, and legal issues in mentoring relationships
- 4 Evaluation of the mentoring program
- 5 Feedback: perspectives on mentoring
- 6 Resource mobilization for sustainability

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sustained itself, as mentees have become mentors to the next generation of scientific researchers.

SUCCESS FACTORS

- Strong vision, commitment, and leadership from the NIMR Director-General who instituted the program
- Recognition of the importance of mentorship to workforce development; integration into a comprehensive institutional strategy for staff development
- Ability to institutionalize the program through policies, requirements, and a framework of expectations; everyone knows what he or she has to do, and everyone does it
- Opportunities for complementary training and skills development

HOW WE GOT THE STORY

This case study was developed through an in-depth interview with Professor Oni Idigbe, former Director-General of NIMR, supplemented with written information provided by Professor Idigbe.

