

# Investigating the Research Interest of Communication Students in Nigerian Tertiary Institutions: A study of Select Institutions in Rivers State, Nigeria

**Christopher I. Ochonogor Ph.D**  
Department of Linguistics and Communication Studies  
University of Port Harcourt, Port Harcourt, Nigeria,

&  
**Daniel Nwanmereni Ph.D**  
Department of Mass Communication  
Wellspring University, Benin City, Nigeria.

**Christopher Ifeakachukwu OCHONOGOR** holds a PhD in Development Communication from the University of Port Harcourt, Nigeria where he teaches communication courses at the undergraduate and graduate programmes in the Department of Linguistics and Communication Studies. His research interest is in cultural and environmental communication.

**Daniel NWANMERENI** holds a Ph.D in Public Relations from the University of Port Harcourt, Nigeria. He teaches communication courses in the Department of Mass Communication, Wellspring University, Benin City, Nigeria. His research interest is in development journalism and corporate communication.

## Abstract

It is no academic rhetoric the place of research in solving the many challenges that plague development efforts across the globe, especially in developing countries. Since independence in 1960, for instance, Nigeria and its people have grappled with diverse social-cultural, economic and political challenges that require continuous articulation of informed policies borne out of tactical researches to address. Regrettably, many Nigerian students find it difficult to undertake academic researches. The result of this difficulty is that many students either indulge in outright plagiarism or engage the services of consultants when asked to undertake a research assignment. This study investigated the interest of Communication students of select tertiary institutions in Rivers State to conduct academic researches. The aim of the study was to investigate the factors that affect the research interest of Communication students. Survey research design was used to study a population of 3,181 from which a sample size of 341 was drawn. Findings of the study showed that some of the factors that discourage many Communication students from undertaking research were lack of understanding of practical research methodology and lack of motivation. The study recommended, among other things, that more time should be allotted to the teaching of research to ensure that students are properly grounded in research methodology.

**Key Terms: Communication Students, Development Challenges, National Growth, Research, Tertiary Institutions.**

## INTRODUCTION

The quest to understand, manipulate and direct the dynamics of the changing society has been with humans for quite some time. Across different era in human history, man has sustained the intelligent demonstration of his rich mental resources which only exemplifies the biblical predestination to conquer and replenish the earth.

The different eras in human history have been marked by unimaginable inventions and discoveries - ideological, philosophical, scientific, technological, etc. Some of these inventions and discoveries have continuously shaped the way humans, as individuals and groups, think, feel and act and how the society operates as it transits from one era to another (McQuail, 2009; DeFleur, 2010). Griffin (2000) observes that the invention of the phonetic alphabet, the printing press and the telegraph were turning points in human history because they affected the way people thought about themselves and the world. What this means is that every invention or discovery leaves humans with the extension of themselves by shaping the way humans think and act.

Understandably, every ideological, philosophical or technological invention or discovery is a demonstration and extension of knowledge. Knowledge represents information or an idea that is derived from learning or experience. Knowledge is the key to socio-cultural, economic and political changes. Thomas (2000) describes knowledge as the key that unlocks opportunities to generate new ideas. Knowledge is derived from coordinated searches or idea-based enquiries. It serves as building blocks (facts and figures) upon which ideological, philosophical and scientific postulations are tested and validated.

Interestingly, many hypothetical and scientific postulations which were results of intelligent research efforts and critical thinking have been found to be foundations for some notable inventions. For instance, in pioneering the wireless telegraph system, Guglielmo Marconi was said to have combined Thomas Edison's ideas of electric power, Heinrich Hertz's metal coil technology and Samuel Morse's telegraphic code as key components in the development of the wireless technology (George, 2006). Thomas (2000) states that knowledge is the key that unlocks opportunities for the generation of new ideas.

Following the understanding of the pivotal role of knowledge in driving economies, different nations of the world invest huge resources in scientific enquires especially as it concerns establishing focus-driven research centres or institutes and providing funds or grants for those centres to function effectively. In addition, universities and other higher institutions are equipped to undertake different kinds of research, just as students who study in such institutions are obligatorily required to undertake academic researches that should generate data (information) and proffer solutions to socio-political and economic challenges confronting the wider

society. It is within this frame of understanding that Flor (2003) observes that information is the force that negates all entropic circumstances that impede the development of a society and its people.

In Nigeria, for instance, apart from establishing designated research centres and institutes across the country, the Federal Government through the National Universities Commission (NUC) and other agencies that oversee tertiary education in the country, have incorporated research as an obligatory aspect of academic programmes in universities, polytechnics and colleges of education. The current practice in these institutions is that, as a part of the requirements for the award of a degree, diploma or certificate, as the case may be, students are obligatorily required to undertake some research exercise in line with the conditions stipulated by an institution. This is, however, after a thorough exposure to practical research methods.

In ideal situations, results of different researches (projects and theses) conducted by students should serve as policy raw materials for different government ministries, departments and agencies for articulating and driving informed policies targeted at solving social problems. The utilisation of results of researches conducted by students in policy formulation by the government also represents one of the ways citizens participate in the governance of the national economy.

### **Statement of the Problem**

In democratic societies, citizens have various ways of contributing and participating in the leadership of their countries, other than holding appointive or elective positions. This condition accounts for why democracy is not simply considered as the periodic casting of ballots to choose leaders but the spread of a civil state of mind which leaves every citizen with the consciousness of being both a member and a builder of the nation. The regulation of Nigeria's National Universities Commission (NUC) and the National Board for Technical Education (NBTE) which obligatorily requires Nigerian students to undertake an academic research as a part of the requirements for the award of a certificate or degree inadvertently provides opportunities for Nigerian students to light up the wider society by providing solutions to social problems and affecting policy directions through research.

Contrarily, there appears to be a surging poor research interest among many Nigerian students. The result of the disappearing research interest among Nigerian students is that when asked to undertake research

assignments, many students either contract out the assignment to consultants or resort to actual plagiarism. Yet, many Nigerians, without the exception of the youths, groan over defective leadership and weak policies. The question is: what are the factors that discourage Nigerian students from undertaking research?

### **Objectives of the study**

The specific objectives of the study were to:

1. investigate Communication students' understanding of the essence of incorporation of research into academic programmes;
2. ascertain the suitability of the stage at which Communication students are introduced to research during their academic programmes;
3. investigate Communication students' understanding and interest to undertake research; and
4. find out the factors that discourage Communication students from undertaking research.

### **LITERATURE REVIEW**

#### **Structuration Theory**

The structuration theory was postulated by the British sociologist - Anthony Giddens (Griffin, 2000; Miller, 2002). The theory is concerned with the result of interactions between social structures and the actions of members of a social system. As identified by Griffin (2000), social structures shape people's actions and are in turn shaped by those actions. The theory stipulates that humans are not simply passive social elements, but creative agents endowed with the resources and capacity to create, refine and manipulate social structures as it defines the realisation of the goals of the changing society.

The concept of social structures defines societal governing structures such as governments, governmental agencies and institutions. It also defines rules that guide conducts, such as laws, policies, standards, etc which are functionally exploited to ensure order and a progressive society. These structures are created and exploited by social agents (humans) towards a working society. Griffin (2000), quoting Giddens (1984), argues that humans are not mere passive agents. "They aren't merely pawns in the game of life or unsuspecting dupes

controlled by unseen forces that can't be resisted" (p. 225). What this means is that humans, as social actors, are naturally endowed with the mental resources to understand the working of their society or environment through purposeful deployment of their intellect.

That is, what is seen as a working social system or organic society is generated through the actions of social agents. Miller (2002), quoting Banks and Riley (1993), states that:

It is through this agency that we all manage to get on in the world, as we encounter both the routine and taken-for-granted activities of daily life and the more unusual situations that sometimes confront us. When we act in this social world, we draw on many resources we have developed in our society and culture. We use shared language, rules for interaction and knowledge of the setting and people to shape our interaction. However, we are not dictated by these social resources or inherited social systems (p. 202).

The foregoing argument buttresses the position that humans are not mere passive social creatures, but equipped with the creative capacity to confront and conquer the vicissitudes of being. Miller (2002), emphasising human creative abilities as identified by Laydeor (1994), reiterates that "we act creatively...by bringing to bear our unique characteristics upon socially shared knowledge. We interpret rules about how to act in the presence of others...just as we all have our own unique ways of dealing with situations" (p. 202). The question that could confront the creative abilities of the human person is the extent such abilities can deal with the demands of the changing society except they are purposefully demonstrated. What this means is that human creative abilities could be latent except being stimulated.

### **Research - A Conceptual Overview**

A research is an investigation or a study that is intended to obtain information or discover facts to solve some problem (Wimmer and Dominick, 2011). It is a scientific enquiry targeted at arriving at solutions to problems or exploring opportunities. A problem is a situation which poses some difficulty to address. It can also be a gap between what ought to happen and what is happening (Aaker, Kumar and Day, 2007). If what ought to happen or that there is a failure of some intended results, such a situation is indicative of the presence of a problem which requires careful examination to unravel and deal with. An opportunity, on the other hand, is a situation that can engender significant benefits when carefully explored.

Research in social sciences adopts the scientific approach. It is scientific because it is empirical and systematic. Empiricism involves observation and not simply theoretical. It is also systematic because it follows some laid-down principles (Wimmer and Dominick, 2011; Ihejirika and Omego, 2011; Asika, 2012). What this means is that the scientific research is methodical and not haphazard.

### **Major Steps in Social Science Research**

Whether a research involves a problem that requires a careful study to be solved or an opportunity to be explored, there are important steps that must be followed. Some major steps in social science research are:

#### **Identification and Definition of the Problem/Opportunity**

The problem to be solved or opportunity to be explored represents the justification or burden of a research exercise. This accounts for why research is said to be problem or opportunity-driven (Okolo, 2009). The problem or opportunity which constrains a research must be clearly defined (Aaker, Kumar and Day, 2007). The importance of the definition of the research problem or opportunity is not only as it concerns the definition of the relevance of a study, but also the identification of the objectives of the study. What this means is that without a clear definition of the problem, the objectives of a study will remain unknown.

#### **Identification of the Scope of Study**

The scope of a study is the range or extent of coverage of the study. The scope of a study must be as manageable as possible (Wimmer and Dominick, 2011). This is not only as it concerns the cost of conducting a study, but also as it concerns the generalisability of the result. The scope of the study markedly defines the population of the study.

#### **Definition of Research Design**

A research design is the specific strategy adopted for the purpose of obtaining data either to test hypotheses or answer research questions (Ohaja, 2003). A research design defines the direction through which a study will be conducted with the purpose of obtaining information for solving a problem or exploring an opportunity. This is why a research design is said to be a strategy. A strategy is a plan, road-map or specific direction adopted to pursue and realise a goal (Ogunsanya, 1991: Oliver, 2001: Nkwocha, 2016). Some research designs include content analysis, experimental design, surveys, etc. The choice or selection of a particular design for



a study is determined, among other conditions, by the appropriateness of such a design to generate data to answer the research questions raised to guide the study or test hypotheses (Asika, 2012).

### **Writing the Research Report**

The report of a research involves a presentation of the data generated by the study (Okolo, 2009). The data are the results or information obtained by the researcher which can otherwise be referred as the facts and figures obtained by the study. It is based on the result of a research that appropriate recommendations can be made to address the problem or exploit the opportunity that was investigated.

### **Reasons for Research by Students in Tertiary Institutions**

In most tertiary institutions, students are obligatory required to conduct an independent research as an integral aspect of their discipline and as part of the requirements for the award of a degree or certificate in such a discipline. This assignment involves the selection of a topic by individual students or group of students and the approval of such topics as it is customary in different institutions (Okolo, 2009). Afterwards, students are assigned to lecturers (supervisors) who oversee and guide them to carry out the assignment in line with approved guidelines. In many institutions, this is always during students' final year on a programme.

The question is: why are students in tertiary institutions required to conduct a research or write a project or thesis as a part of the requirements for the completion of their academic programmes? Basically, research is used to generate information and to solve problems. Results or findings of students' research assignments serve as policy raw materials for the government, governmental and non-governmental agencies.

### **METHODOLOGY**

The nature of this study necessitated the use of survey research design. Survey involves a study of the characteristics of a sample which can be attributed to a larger population (Ohaja, 2003; Ihejirika and Omego, 2011). The population of the study was 3,181 which comprised of Communication students of University of Port Harcourt, Rivers State University and Captain Elechi Amadi Polytechnic. Based on the population, a sample of 341 was used for the study. The sample was based on the sampling system of Keyton (2001). To administer data instrument (questionnaire) on the sample, the purposive and convenience sampling techniques were used. The instrument was administered to final year Communication students of the institutions during

lecture-free periods. Data presentation was done in tables using weighted mean score based on the five-points Likert scale.

## DATA PRESENTATION AND ANALYSIS

In order to obtain data for the study, 341 copies of questionnaire were administered to the study sample (Communication Studies students of University of Port Harcourt, Rivers State University and Captain Elechi Amadi Polytechnic). Of this number, 328 (96.18%) copies were filled and returned. The other 13 (3.82%) copies were not returned. Data presentation was based on the copies that were filled and returned.

**Table 1: Students understanding of the incorporation of research into academic programmes**

S/N	Questionnaire Items	SA 5	A 4	U 3	SD 2	D 1	Total	WMS	Remarks
1.	Research is a part of the requirements for the award of a degree or diploma	237	61	8	13	9	1,488	4.5	Accepted
2.	Research is a compulsory aspect of academic programmes in Nigerian tertiary institutions	183	114	4	19	7	1,542	4.7	Accepted
3.	Research is only a regulation by my institution	23	19	45	189	52	756	2.3	Rejected
4.	Research is essential to formulate policies that guide development efforts	238	64	3	16	7	1,494	4.5	Accepted
5.	Students participate in research to aid development processes	214	52	23	11	28	1,397	4.2	Accepted

Data presented in Table 1 indicate that Communication students of University of Port Harcourt, Rivers State University and Captain Elechi Amadi Polytechnic understood the essence of incorporation of research into academic programmes. This is evident from the positive weighted mean scores obtained by items 1, 2, 4 and 5 of the questionnaire.



**Table 2: Suitability of the stage at which Communication students are introduced to research methods**

S/N	Questionnaire Items	SA 5	A 4	U 3	SD 2	D 1	Total	WMS	Remarks
6.	You would like to be introduced to research earlier than it is currently being done	276	36	16			1,572	4.7	Accepted
7.	You would like research to be taught as more semester as possible to enable you to have a better understanding of practical research	198	93	14	21	2	1,448	4.4	Accepted
8.	You believe that a single semester is not enough to understand practical research methods	203	88	11	19	7	1,445	4.4	Rejected

On the suitability of the stage at which Communication students are introduced to research, data presented in Table 2 indicate that Communication students of the institutions are not comfortable with the stage at which they are introduced to research. This is evident from the weighted mean scores of 4.7, 4.4 and 4.4, respectively obtained by items 6, 7 and 8 of the questionnaire.

**Table 3: Students' understanding and interest to conduct research**

S/N	Questionnaire Items	SA 5	A 4	U 3	SD 2	D 1	Total	WMS	Remarks
9.	Having been taught, you have good understanding of research methodology	22	38	61	104	103	756	2.3	Rejected
10.	You can conveniently do your project yourself	26	31	34	101	136	694	2.1	Rejected
11.	You have interest in conducting researches to solve social problems	31	26	43	82	146	698	2.1	Rejected
12.	You can also conduct independent studies after school to contribute to the development of the society	34	37	81	125	51	862	2.6	Rejected

With respect to students' understanding and interest to undertake research, data presented in Table 3 indicate that Communication students of the institutions do not have good understanding of research methods even after they were introduced to research. The table also shows that many Communication Studies students of the institutions do not have interest to undertake research. This report is evident from the weighted mean scores of 2.3, 2.1, 2.1 and 2.6, respectively obtained by items 9, 10, 11 and 12 of the questionnaire.

**Table 4: Factors that discourage students from undertaking research**

S/N	Questionnaire Items	SA 5	A 4	U 3	SD 2	D 1	Total	WMS	Remarks
13.	Inadequacy of time allotted to teach research	132	113	29	33	21	1,366	4.1	Accepted
14.	Financial constraints	171	102		28	27	1,346	4.1	Accepted
15.	Lack of motivation by government	46	71	125	61	25	1,036	3.1	Accepted
16.	Difficult supervisors	136	98	11	59	24	1,247	3.8	Accepted
17.	Lack of good understanding of research methods	172	59	31	48	18	1,185	3.6	Accepted

Data presented in Table 4 indicate that the factors that discourage Communication students from undertaking research were inadequacy of time allotted to teaching research, financial constraints, lack of motivation, difficult supervisors and lack of understanding of research methods. This is based on the weighted mean scores of 4.1, 4.1, 3.1, 3.8 and 3.6, respectively obtained by items 13, 14, 15, 16 and 17 of the questionnaire.

### Discussion of Findings

The discussion was done in the order the objectives of the study were organised.

#### **Objective 1: Investigate Communication students' understanding of the essence of incorporation of research into academic programmes**

To provide answers to this objective, five items were formulated. Responses to these items indicate that Communication students of University of Port Harcourt, Rivers State University and Captain Elechi Amadi Polytechnic have good understanding of the essence of incorporation of research into academic programmes. This is evident from the weighted mean scores of 4.5, 4.7, 4.5 and 4.2, respectively obtained by items 1, 2, 4 and 5 of the questionnaire (Table 1). Data presented in the same table indicate that the students are abreast of the fact that research is not only a part of the requirements for the award of a degree, but also crucial to development efforts especially as it concerns the formulation of policies to address social problems.

Data in Table 1 also show that Communication students of the institutions understood the importance of their participation in the development of the wider society through research. The understanding of the place of research and their participation in development efforts by the students supports the position of Giddens (1984) that members of the society are not simply passive elements, but creative agents endowed with the capacity to create, refine and manipulate social structures. What this means is that if any society must rise to conquer its

problems and attain greatness, its people must form a united front to make meaningful contributions to keep their society on the path of progress.

**Objective 2: Ascertain the suitability of the stage at which Communication students are introduced to research during their academic programmes**

Responses regarding the suitability of the stage at which Communication students of the institutions studied are introduced to research indicate students' dissatisfaction with the current stage at which they are being introduced to research methodology. This is evident from the weighted mean scores of 4.7, 4.4 and 4.4, respectively obtained by items 6, 7 and 8 of the questionnaire (Table 2). Data presented in the table indicate students' desire to be introduced to research methods earlier than it is currently being done. Data presented in Table 2 also indicate students' desire to be taught research as many semesters as possible to enable them become grounded in practical research.

Ensuring that students become grounded in research is the only way to prepare them not only to do their projects before graduation, but also to be able to conduct independent studies after school in order to contribute to the development of the wider society and to solve social problems. If the effort to ensure that students are grounded in research is not made, even lecturers themselves would have to go through some horror to make sense out of what is being put together as a project by a student (Okolo, 2009).

**Objective 3: Investigate Communication students' understanding and interest to undertake research**

Responses regarding students' understanding and interest to undertake research indicate that many students lack good understanding and the capacity to undertake research either to meet the requirements for the award of a degree or to conduct independent studies after school. Data presented in Table 3 also showed the lack of interest among many Communication students of the institutions to undertake research. This is evident from the weighted mean scores of 2.3, 2.1, 2.1 and 2.6, respectively obtained by items 9, 10, 11 and 12 of the questionnaire (Table 3).

The result of the investigation of students' understanding and interest to undertake research shows that training and good understanding of research methods is fundamental for any effort in research either to meet the

requirements to earn a degree or to carry out independent studies afterwards to solve social problems and contribute to the development of the society. Okolo (2009) argues that training in research not only ensures that students use research materials satisfactorily but it also ensures that an individual grows professionally.

#### **Objective 4: Find out factors that discourage Communication students from undertaking research**

Responses to the factors that discourage Communication students from undertaking research indicate that there are several factors that plague students' interest in research. Some of the factors are inadequacy of time allotted to teaching research, financial constraints, lack of motivation by government, difficult supervisors and lack of good understanding of research methods. This is evident from the weighted mean scores of 4.1, 4.1, 3.1, 3.8 and 3.6, respectively obtained by items 13, 14, 15, 16 and 17 of the questionnaire (Table 4).

The implication of the foregoing is that students' participation in research is thwarted mainly by dearth of knowledge of research methodology due to inadequacy of training and lack of motivation by relevant government agencies. The condition is that these challenges have become entropic not only to research interest among Nigerian students but also to progress and development of the wider society (Okolo, 2009). This is because the absence of knowledge of research among Nigerian students and graduates translates into the inability to undertake independent studies by professionals in different sectors of the country's economy.

#### **Conclusion**

The lackadaisical attitude of many Nigerian students towards research is not due to the fact that they (Nigerian students) do not understand the essence of incorporation of research into academic programmes. The conditions that account for the lack of research interest by many Nigerian students include the inappropriateness of the stage at which they are introduced to research methods, the inadequacy of time within which students are taught research (usually a single semester in many higher institutions in Nigeria), lack of motivation by relevant government agencies and the threat posed by difficult supervisors. These conditions must be carefully addressed to encourage the contributions of Nigerian students to social development and leadership through research.

## Recommendations

Based on the findings of this study, the following recommendations were considered helpful:

1. Nigeria's Federal Ministry of Education, the National Universities Commission (NUC) and the National Board for Technical Education (NBTE) saddled with the mandate to oversee tertiary education in the country should reconsider the stage at which students are introduced to research within the lifetime of their academic programmes. This is to review and ascertain the viability of the current order with respect to the place of research in nation building.
2. The current single-semester research exposure in many tertiary institutions in Nigeria should be reviewed. Allocating more semesters to teaching research will enable students to be more grounded in research methods.
3. Government agencies and the private sector should encourage Nigerian students to undertake research by providing small grants. Such grants will not only motivate students to undertake research but will also assist indigent students whose research interest may be dampened by financial constraints.
4. In recognition of the importance of research to national development, lecturers who serve as projects/theses supervisors should demonstrate prudence to encourage students to carry out their research assignments. This will help to churn out reports that serve as raw materials for government policies or decisions.

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