

CHAPTER

8

Supporting research in Côte d'Ivoire: Processes for selecting and evaluating projects

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Introduction

Excellence in research is a relevant concept and used in all areas and research structures. However, there is no consensus on the definition of excellence. It has seen a boom in its use in the 2000s and in developed countries that consider it a fundamental criterion for defining their policies in their systems of higher education and research. Even if, unfortunately, there is no consensus on the meaning of excellence, and given the tangled web of fuzzy concepts and ambiguous meanings, there are still attempts to objectify and operationalise the term (Tijssen et al. 2002). However, these attempts have not resulted in the standardised identification of selection criteria, evaluation methods and peer review of projects. Implicitly, excellence can be seen as an effort to achieve the highest possible quality, considering the circumstances. This conceptualisation is rooted in the different research-funding policies, and social and cultural environments in which universities and research centres operate.

The *Programme Appui Stratégique à la Recherche Scientifique* (PASRES) (Strategic Support Program for Scientific Research), is built around the ambition to be one of the best research funding bodies in Africa. For

PASRES, the selection and evaluation of funded projects is first and foremost the pillar that guarantees the reliability and authenticity of any research. This selection is based on criteria and fundamentals that take into account the definition that PASRES gives to the concept of excellence in research. Internal excellence evaluation indicators are identified by the programme in the project selection and evaluation process. Competitive funds for the financing of scientific research and the fruit of the Côte d'Ivoire-Swiss cooperation, it was set up on 15 June 2007. From 2008 to 2018, PASRES has financed a total of 201 projects.

For PASRES, excellence in research must rely on the expertise of researchers and research institutions to produce relevant, rigorous and applicable research results, while responding to different national needs and proposing alternatives to stimulate the development of the country. It must respect the various protocols and ethical processes and rely on collaboration between researchers and institutions. Excellence in research therefore focuses on issues that require an approach based on new, high-quality scientific and technical knowledge. This involves the use of an appropriate and original research methodology. This quest for excellence also requires an allowance for adequate equipment and facilities to research institutions to enable scientists to break the threshold of theory and adopt practices to create a globally competitive scientific system. In addition to this equipment, it would be necessary to provide open access to data and promote North/South and South/South scientific exchanges to our researchers, even if the national language of communication constitutes a barrier to scientific exchanges and to the integration of those researchers in various research networks. In addition, in order to meet international standards, the quality of research produced by Côte d'Ivoire researchers must be improved, even though the scarcity of research grants still constitutes a real obstacle.

But, beyond this purely academic vision, PASRES believes that excellence in research in African countries must transcend the publication stage of research results in scientific magazines and journals. It must include the 'research uptake' dimension. This mainly scientific enrichment (publications in scientific journals and

magazines) in African countries must be simultaneously economic, cultural and social. Since science is at the service of development, the results of the research conducted must consider national, regional and international realities, depending on the funding the project receives. As stipulated by Yule (2010), the scope of research quality dimensions must include the utility, accessibility and quality of end-user impacts.

In order to achieve this, PASRES has (based on the Swiss National Science Foundation (SNSF) model) identified and adapted to the national context, a number of criteria and activities likely to initiate this excellence in research in Côte d'Ivoire. We thus have the process of evaluation and selection of projects, as well as the capacity-building activities of PASRES laureates, researchers and instructor-researchers from universities, research centres and Côte d'Ivoire's polytechnic university.

This chapter aims to present the perception of excellence in research at PASRES through its selection and peer-evaluation process of funded projects, and to draw some reflections that may inform a research-granting agency in a low- or middle-income country.

Excellence in research and the selection process for funded projects

At the end of a call for projects, the projects (submitted by a tandem composed of one or more university researchers and one or more community partners) are evaluated by the PASRES Scientific Council (SC). The evaluation process is based on criteria related to the scientific and social relevance of the programme's objectives, the involvement of partners, student training, knowledge mobilisation and feasibility (schedule and budget). These criteria, approved by the PASRES Steering Committee (SC), are contained in a project call for all researchers and partners.

Twice a year, the Executive Secretariat of PASRES opens a call for proposals, which must meet the formal requirements as specified by PASRES. Projects are pre-selected on the basis of eligibility criteria and then evaluated by a jury of experts set up by the programme. Each project is evaluated by a minimum of two experts from the

identified research area. The maximum amount that can be granted by PASRES per eligible project is 15 000 000 XAF (approximately 23 000 Euros). Given the limited amount of grant money awarded per project, PASRES strongly encourages project co-financing. With this in mind, the participation of the programme in consortia such as ERAFRICA, Biodiversa-EU and the Belmont Forum help national researchers to obtain greater funding and expand their social capital through the networking system.

Calls for thematic projects are launched by PASRES once a year to finance specific research projects responding to a specific national priority. This call is mainly in line with the programme's strategic objectives and responds to emergency situations that weaken our social and economic environments. These include issues related to climate change and agriculture (especially food).

Funding awarded on excellence criteria

Within the framework of the funding of research proposals, the selection of research projects to be supported benefits from the expertise of specialists from the scientific world, who know the needs and the urgencies of the research in the ten fields financed by PASRES.

The needs of researchers cannot be 'compartmentalised'; PASRES receives requests from all areas of research each year. Thus, in order to proceed with the selection of the best proposals, PASRES has identified criteria based on its vision of the quality of research that transcends disciplinary boundaries.

These four main criteria are taken into consideration in the evaluation of project proposals submitted to PASRES. The first criterion is concerned with administrative aspects, including a letter of commitment from the principal researcher of the project, and a letter of intent from the institution hosting the project. A project summary sheet constitutes the first step in the submitted project selection process. The analysis is carried out by the Executive Secretariat of PASRES.

The second level of analysis considers the scientific aspects of the project. As for the content, it relates to the scientific experience of the project leader in the field concerned, the coherence and logic in

the development of the project, the collaborations envisaged within the framework of the project's realisation, the attractiveness of the theme, the quality of the project's summary, the presentation of the problem, the definition of both the general and specific objectives, the proposed methodology and the mechanisms for the enrichment of the research results.

The third criterion considered by PASRES is the project's impact. At this level, the PASRES bodies ensure that the projects selected for funding perfectly meet the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), contribute to the fight against poverty, have social, economic and cultural impacts, offer potential for popularisation and transfer, and can be sources of scientific and technological innovation.

The fourth criterion, which assesses the financial aspects, must comply with the following standards:

- Consistency with the nature and duration of the project;
- Respect for the structuring indicated in the submission file;
- Justification of the amounts indicated in the various headings;
- Adequacy of the materials and equipment requested with the submitted project; and
- Cost of realising the realistic and reasonable project not to exceed the maximum amount that may be granted by PASRES. This specific point is one of the eliminatory items when analysing the administrative compliance of the proposal.

Stakeholders involved in the project selection process

The project selection and evaluation process at PASRES involves various stakeholders whose respective roles are as follows:

- *The Executive Secretariat*, which is the centralising and receiving body for the various financing requests and deals mainly with monitoring how the various proposals are handled.
- *The Scientific Council* is responsible for evaluating project proposals by considering the expertise of external evaluators and distributing them according to their level of excellence. Ranking

is based on the scores obtained. In order to limit the subjective nature of the evaluations, the Scientific Council also arbitrates the opinions submitted by external evaluators. They make financing proposals to the Steering Committee to acquire the financing decision.

- *The Steering Committee*, meanwhile, reinforces the funding proposals made by the Scientific Council on the basis of two criteria that consider the national priorities in terms of socio-economic and cultural development and budget availability at PASRES.

Monitoring and evaluation mechanisms, actions, and research excellence at PASRES

Peer review is the main evaluation mechanism for funded projects and articles published by PASRES. The funded projects vary in duration and are regularly evaluated to determine the proper use of the allocated funds and especially the quality of the results obtained.

Monitoring and evaluation mechanisms at PASRES

The monitoring and evaluation mechanisms at PASRES are based on excellence in project management. Indeed, criteria such as: the relevance of the obtained results, adequacy of the methodology, respect of the time chart and the socio-economic and cultural impacts of the project are essential indicators to ensure the continuity of cash outlays. The main evaluators are experts from the scientific world (to judge the quality of the research performed), the private sector (in the context of economic enrichment) and other institutions (to measure the cultural and social potential of the research).

Funded projects may be suspended or permanently terminated in the event of weak or missing results and the misuse of funds. The deviation from the pathway and the objectives set initially within the framework of a financed project cause the project to stop. This weakness is felt mainly in the writing of scientific projects and articles, which is at the base of the lower level of scientific publications in peer-reviewed journals. Côte d'Ivoire does not have enough

scientific journals, and to correct this deficit (and in the quest for excellence in scientific publications), PASRES decided to make available two peer-reviewed scientific journals to researchers and their laureates. PASRES has, to its credit, a social sciences and linguistics journal called *RSS PASRES* (since 2013) and another in environment and biodiversity called *REB PASRES* (2016). Edited periodically, the journal *RSS PASRES* has four issues per year, and the *REB PASRES* has three issues per year. Publications in these journals are entirely at the expense of PASRES (from the peer review to the physical production of the journal). All journal expenses are incumbent on PASRES in order to allow PhD and postdoctoral students to disseminate obtained research results to the national and international scientific communities. These journals are not exclusively geared towards to national researchers. The programme aims to establish other scientific journals that will take into account the other scientific fields considered by PASRES. PASRES' current challenge is the publication of these journals, from a printed format to an e-journal, as well as their indexation, and greater impact, at the international level. This evolving process responds to the need for a better distribution and popularisation of research results for better visibility of the authors at the scientific and international levels.

In addition, PASRES grants financial and technical support to researchers for the publication of scientific articles in international journals. To this end, training workshops are organised and fully funded regularly by PASRES for teaching scientific writing to researchers in national universities and research centres.

Actions and research excellence at PASRES

In view of its integration into globally accepted standards for research excellence, PASRES has initiated a series of actions within its research management system.

First, PASRES organises monthly training sessions for masters and postdoctoral students at universities and at research centres in writing eligible scientific projects and scientific articles, according to

international standards and the recommendations of large donors. These capacity-building activities aim to make the research results of Cote d'Ivoire researchers internationally competitive.

Second, thematic conferences are also organised by PASRES to present the funded research results to the private sector and to civil society. All the actions are fully funded by PASRES. Striving to make excellence central, the programme does not skimp on the means to support and assist researchers, laboratories, universities and research centres. Excellence goes hand in hand with the concepts of quality, efficiency, applicability and competitiveness, and therefore merit awards are granted by PASRES to the best researchers in the scientific fields. These include the PASRES Young Inventor Award, the PASRES Young Parasitology Researcher Award and the PASRES Young Researcher Award in Sociology/Anthropology. Granting of these awards is based on a very selective process, following a call for applications at universities and research centres.

Conclusion

To make research excellence in Côte d'Ivoire a reality, PASRES attempts to instill a culture of excellence in research in national research institutions. Among other things, this involves legislating laws on research at the national level, the development of partnership networks (collaboration), the involvement of the private sector in the execution of research projects, the establishment of an autonomous structure of results appreciation, and the promotion of interdisciplinarity, without forgetting support for mobility, research unit equipment, and gender equality management in terms of research opportunities. This is not easy to achieve because of the complexity of its conceptual definition, but the challenges faced by the Research Granting Councils must motivate the pursuit of excellence in all organisations.

Wishing to help the competitiveness of Côte d'Ivoire researchers, PASRES integrates partnership networks in the field of research and in both regional and international initiatives. This opening of the programme should allow new knowledge and technologies to be

acquired at the international level in the fields of science, research, technology and innovation in Côte d'Ivoire. But what about research excellence in our universities and research centres? Exploring this question will help to assess the various perceptions of excellence at the national level for the adoption of a reference framework document.

References

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