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Centralized or Decentralized Research Management: Which Is the Best Structure for My Organization

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Outline

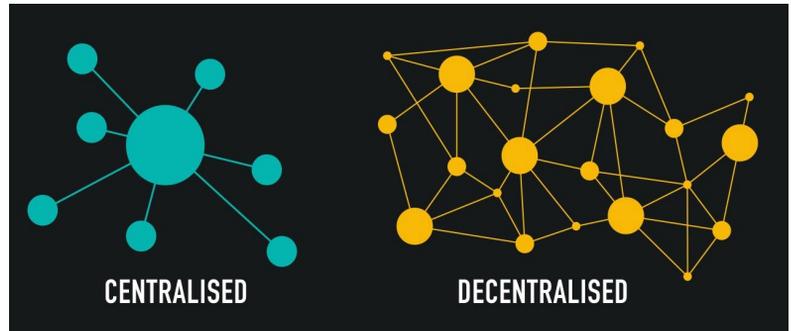
Introduction & Background

Case Study

Decentralization Model: MRCG at LSHTM
Research Management Infrastructure

Centralized vs. Decentralized Research Administration

- A single, central office that oversees all aspects of research administration for the entire institution
- Structure:
 - One central office or department manages grant submission, budget compliance, etc.
 - Key decisions and workflows routed through the central team
- Authority and tasks are distributed among departments, colleges, or individual units
- Structure:
 - Each department or college has its own administrative staff managing research grants and activities
 - More autonomy in decision-making within units



Pros & Cons of Centralized Model

- Efficiency in Compliance: Easier to enforce policies and maintain uniformity in compliance with laws and regulations.
- Streamlined Processes: Fewer redundancies, clear hierarchies, and consistent handling of tasks.
- Specialized Expertise: Central office develops specialized knowledge in all aspects of research management.
- Less Flexibility: Slower to adapt to the specific needs of individual departments or projects.
- Potential Bottlenecks: Central office may become overwhelmed, leading to delays.
- Perceived Reduced Departmental Autonomy: Departments may feel disconnected from administrative processes.

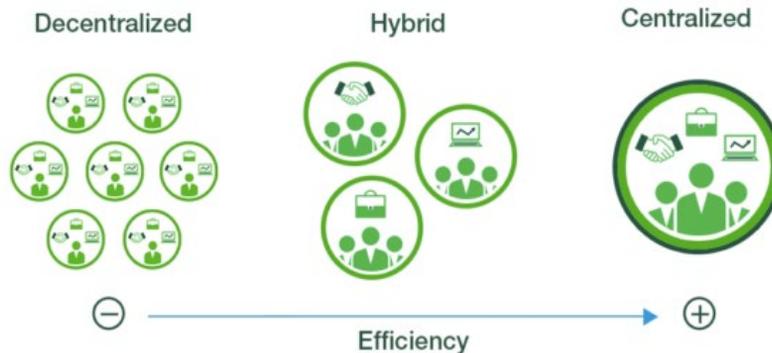
Pros & Cons of Decentralized Model

- **Autonomy:** Departments have control over their own research projects, tailoring administration to their needs.
- **Faster Decision-Making:** Less bureaucracy, quicker handling of project-specific tasks.
- **Increased Engagement*:** Researchers may feel more involved in administration, leading to greater ownership.
- **Inconsistency:** Processes and compliance may vary between departments, leading to potential issues with oversight.
- **Duplication of Effort:** Each department may have to replicate administrative processes, increasing overall workload.
- **Potential Knowledge Gaps:** Decentralized staff may lack specialized expertise in certain areas.

**Some faculty would like to have direct access to administrator and can be super hands-on*

Hybrid Model

- Combination of centralized and decentralized approaches.
- Structure:
 - Central oversight for compliance and major functions, with departments managing day-to-day administration.



Example: Centralized Model in the United States (Contd.)

- Georgetown University
 - Centralized Policy Development
 - Policies related to research operations, data management, and intellectual property are created and managed centrally. This allows the institutions to maintain uniformity in how research is conducted and overseen, even though research projects themselves may span multiple disciplines and departments.
 - Centralized Training and Support
 - Georgetown centralized training and support programs to ensure that faculty and staff understand compliance requirements and are up-to-date on the latest funding mechanisms. These support offices provide workshops on grant writing, compliance, and financial management, which helps streamline processes across departments. Georgetown's Office of Research Oversight/Regulatory Affairs ensures university-wide research integrity and compliance with federal and state regulations, while its Research Enhancement Office provides centralized support for faculty applying for grants.

Example: Centralized Model in the United States (Contd.)

- The centralization at Georgetown helps manage the complexity and scale of research activities at large public institutions, especially those with diverse research portfolios across multiple disciplines. Centralization ensures consistency, compliance, and risk management while also providing high-level support to faculty.
- However, some elements of decentralization still exist within specific departments, where local administrators handle day-to-day operations like preparing grant proposals, managing department-specific budgets, and interfacing directly with faculty. This combination allows for flexibility within the constraints of a centralized policy framework.

Example: Centralized Model in the United States (Contd.)

– Pros & Cons

- Clear, consistent processes across multiple campuses.
- Efficiency in regulatory compliance.
- Centralized expertise available for all campuses.
- Slower responses to specific departmental needs.
- Centralized office can become overwhelmed, leading to delays in approvals.



Example: Centralized Model in the United States (Contd.)

– Case Study

- Scenario: A faculty member applies for a National Institutes of Health (NIH) research grant.
- Process: The grant proposal is routed through the centralized research administration office, JORA (main campus), which reviews all submissions for compliance with federal, state, and institutional regulations. The central office also manages the budget review, approval process, and the final submission of the grant.



Example: Centralized Model in the United States (Contd.) – Case Study



- **Challenges:**
 - Delays occur as multiple levels of approval are required. The centralized office handles submissions for the entire university, leading to bottlenecks, especially close to grant submission deadlines.
 - The faculty member feels disconnected from the administrative process and does not have direct access to the grant submission system.
- **Outcome:** While compliance is ensured, the delay in approvals results in increased stress for the faculty member. The project start-up is also slower due to the central office managing all post-award activities.

Example: Decentralized Model in the United States

- NC State University
 - Key Features
 - NC State University is a public R1 institution. An R1 institution is classified as a doctoral university with very high research activity.
 - Research administration at NC State is decentralized and takes many forms across the university. Centrally, the Office of Sponsored Programs and Regulatory Compliance (SPARCS) — a unit of the Office of Research and Innovation — works in tandem with the Office of Contracts and Grants (C and G) — a unit of the Office of Finance and Administration. Meanwhile, each college has its own College Research Office (CRO), which also performs essential support functions for its researchers.
 - NC State has 10 colleges and several non-academic units, which are organized in varying structures. Some colleges have research administration centralized at the college level, some colleges have it decentralized, and some have a hybrid of the two. Faculty work with their department/college/unit to submit proposals and manage awards. Central offices handle some submissions, awards negotiations, prior approvals, invoicing and financial management.

Example: Decentralized Model in the United States (Contd.)

- NC State University
 - Distributed Financial and Compliance Support:
 - Financial management of grants, including budget oversight, expenditure tracking, and compliance monitoring, is often done at the department or college level. Units have their own finance and administrative teams dedicated to ensuring that grant money is spent in accordance with the sponsor's guidelines.
 - Compliance functions like human subject research, animal care, and conflict-of-interest monitoring are also handled through decentralized structures, though they report back to central compliance offices.
 - Flexibility in Research Operations
 - Decentralization provides flexibility in research operations, allowing departments to implement processes that fit their unique research portfolios. This helps expedite grant approvals and project start-up processes because the administrative functions are closer to the researchers.

Example: Decentralized Model in the United States (Contd.) – Pros & Cons

- Responsiveness: Departments and research units can tailor their administrative processes to meet the specific needs of their research areas, offering more direct and rapid support to faculty.
- Autonomy: Faculty and researchers have more control and input over the administrative aspects of their research projects, increasing engagement and ownership of the process.
- Specialization: Departmental administrators often have deep knowledge of the specific funding mechanisms and compliance requirements related to their disciplines, enabling them to provide specialized support.
- Duplication of Efforts: With each unit managing its own administrative functions, there can be inefficiencies or duplicative efforts across the institution.
- Inconsistent Practices: Although the ORSP provides guidelines, practices can vary significantly from one department to another, leading to inconsistencies in how research administration is handled.
- Resource Disparities: Some departments may lack the resources or expertise to manage complex grants as effectively as larger, better-funded units.

Example: Decentralized Model in the United States (Contd.) – Case Study

- Developing and Submitting Proposals
 - Step 1: Proposal Development: Faculty members begin by conceptualizing their research project and identifying potential funding sources, such as federal agencies (e.g., NSF, DOE), foundations, or industry sponsors. The college/department's research administrators assist in navigating these funding opportunities. They then work with their departmental research administrators to prepare a comprehensive research proposal. This includes developing the narrative, outlining the project goals, and creating a detailed budget. Research administrators ensure that the proposal aligns with the funding agency's guidelines and University policies.
 - Step 2: Pre-Submission Review: Once the proposal is ready, the department research administrator submits the proposal for internal review. At this stage, compliance checks for regulatory issues (such as IRB approval for human subjects or IACUC for animal research) are conducted. Cost-sharing, indirect costs, and budgetary details are reviewed by the administrators to ensure they comply with institutional policies and the requirements of the sponsor. Proposals are uploaded to the internal system, which is the central system for managing sponsored projects.
 - At NC State, the final version of the proposal should be uploaded in PINS
 - Step 3: Proposal Sent to the Sponsor after College Review
 - NC State has designated authorized official representatives that have the authority to sign and submit proposals, as well as contracts and/or agreements.

Example: Decentralized Model in the United States (Contd.) – Case Study

- Step 4: Set Up Project
 - In order for a project team to begin spending on a sponsored project, certain steps must be taken in order to set up the account or authorize pre-award spending
 - Negotiating and accepting an award – awards are reviewed and, if necessary, negotiated by the appropriate university official to ensure the terms and conditions are acceptable to the university. The type and scope of the project will largely determine the length and complexity of the negotiation process. The end result of award negotiations is a mutually agreeable set of terms under which the university will conduct the proposed project.
 - Pre-award account
 - When assured that a sponsored agreement is reasonably expected to materialize, a pre-award project ID can be established for the purposes of beginning to recruit project employees, order specialized equipment and supplies, and the like, in preparation for the start of the project. In these cases, the principal investigator (PI) may request that a project ID (i.e., account number) be established in advance of the award document. By making this request, the PI and their administrative unit are acknowledging that they carry full financial responsibility for any costs incurred, prior to the receipt of the award.
 - Award Set Up
 - Contracts and Grants generally establishes project IDs and processes any award modifications within six business days of receiving them from SPARCS. The information entered into PeopleSoft Financials is integrated overnight. An email notification is automatically sent when a new project ID is established. Hard copies of the award documents are sent to the college research office(s).

Example: Decentralized Model in the United States (Contd.) – Case Study

- Step 5: Manage Project
 - Monitoring
 - The principal investigator (PI), senior project personnel and affiliated research administration staff are responsible for ensuring that only allowable costs related to the project are charged or transferred to the sponsored project and are responsible for monitoring any subrecipients. Monitoring is necessary to ensure that all charges posted to the project are accurate, allowable and correctly identified using the appropriate account codes. Additionally, monitoring facilitates the preparation of accurate and timely financial reports during project closeout.
- Step 6: Project Close out
 - Principal Investigator
 - Review award expenditure, review and approve sub-recipient reports, finalize all related forms and reports
 - Department/College Financial Manager's Responsibilities
 - Receive final invoice and remit payment to sub-awardees
 - Reconcile grant fund
 - Resolve overdrafts
 - Notify individuals with spending authority to stop charging on project
 - Provide cost-share report
 - Post Award – Grant Management responsibilities
 - Send final invoice to sponsor/funding agencies
 - Prepare and submit financial status report (return unexpended balance, supporting forms and reports, closing out sub-award, consultant encumbrances)
 - Prepare and process closing entries

Example: Hybrid Model in the United States

- UCLA

- UCLA employs a hybrid research administration model that combines centralized compliance and policy oversight with decentralized grant management in departments.
- At UCLA, and many other hybrid model institutions, ORA has the final signing authority
- Structure:
 - A central research administration office sets policies and ensures compliance with federal regulations, while departments handle day-to-day research management tasks, including pre- and post-award activities.
- Key Features:
 - Central office for compliance and major policies (like export control, IRB, and IACUC).
 - Decentralized administrative staff within departments to manage grant submissions, budget, and specific project needs.

Example: Hybrid Model in the United States (Contd.)

- University of California, Los Angeles (UCLA)
 - Centralized Compliance Oversight:
 - Compliance functions, such as Institutional Review Boards (IRBs) for human subjects research, animal research oversight (IACUC), and conflict of interest monitoring, are managed centrally. This ensures consistency across departments and schools and minimizes risks associated with research misconduct or non-compliance with regulatory requirements.
 - UCLA ensure that research practices align with UC-wide policies, such as those governed by the UC Office of the President (UCOP), providing a streamlined and consistent approach to compliance.
 - Centralized Financial Management:
 - The centralized research administration also manages financial operations for research activities, including pre- and post-award accounting, ensuring that the funds are spent according to the guidelines of the grants and contracts.
 - OCGA works with the university's central finance office to manage budgets, oversee indirect costs, and ensure compliance with financial reporting standards. This alleviates some administrative burden from individual departments.

Example: Hybrid Model in the United States

- University of California, Los Angeles (UCLA)
 - The UC system operates under a hybrid research administration model, where a central office manages the administration, compliance, and policy oversight for research across all campuses.
 - Each campus has a research administration office, but the main system-wide office (UC Office of the President) establishes overarching policies and ensures compliance with federal and state regulations.
 - Key Features:
 - Standardized procedures and policies for grant management.
 - Single point of contact for compliance with federal laws like IRB (Institutional Review Board) and IACUC (Institutional Animal Care and Use Committee) regulations.
 - A central Office of Contracts and Grants Administration (OCGA) that provides high-level oversight for research activities across the university.
 - The ORA handles the negotiation and approval of research contracts and grants, ensuring that all projects comply with university policies, state and federal laws, and funding agency requirements. This provides a unified point of contact for both faculty and external sponsors.
 - Central office for compliance and major policies (like export control, IRB, and IACUC).

Example: Hybrid Model in the United States (Contd.) – Pros & Cons

- Balance between consistent policy enforcement and flexibility in department-specific tasks.
- Allows specialized expertise in the central office while keeping departments agile and responsive.
- Communication between the central office and departments can sometimes be complex, leading to delays or misinterpretations of policies.

Example: Hybrid Model in the United States (Contd.) – Case Study

- Scenario: The PI School of Medicine is applying for multiple research grants related to neuroscience and health sciences.
- Processes
 - Compliance with Institutional Review Board (IRB) regulations, human subject protections, and ethical considerations are overseen by the central research office.
 - Meanwhile, individual departments handle their own grant submissions, budgeting, and post-award processes, allowing them to manage resources more effectively and align with the specific research timelines.
- Challenges
 - Occasional communication breakdowns between the central office and the departments result in confusion over who is responsible for certain aspects of compliance.
 - Coordinating between central compliance and decentralized administrative staff can be complex, particularly when there are policy changes.
- Outcome
 - The hybrid model allows the university to balance the need for centralized compliance and specialized department management. While communication issues arise, the flexibility offered to departments generally leads to more effective research management.

Tips & Other Considerations



- The structure of research administration—whether centralized, decentralized, or hybrid—often depends on several factors, and the size of the institution's research portfolio is a significant one among them. However, it's not the sole determinant.
 - Large Institutions with Extensive Portfolios:
 - Hybrid Models Are Common: Institutions with large and diverse research portfolios, such as major universities and research hospitals, often adopt a hybrid model. This approach balances the need for central oversight with the flexibility of departmental autonomy.
 - Reasoning:
 - Complexity Management: A large volume of research activities across various disciplines requires a system that can handle complexity without becoming inefficient.
 - Specialized Support: Departments or units may have specialized needs that are best managed locally.
 - Compliance and Risk Management: Central offices ensure that the institution meets regulatory requirements and mitigates risks.

Tips & Other Considerations



- Smaller Institutions with Limited Portfolios:
 - Centralized Models Are More Feasible: Institutions with smaller research portfolios often adopt a centralized model.
 - Reasoning:
 - Resource Optimization: Limited administrative resources are concentrated in a central office to avoid duplication of efforts.
 - Consistency: A centralized approach ensures uniformity in processes and compliance.
 - Cost-Effectiveness: Centralization can reduce overhead costs associated with maintaining multiple administrative units.
- Medium-Sized Institutions:
 - Flexible Approaches: These institutions may choose either centralized or decentralized models based on other factors such as institutional culture, leadership preferences, or the specific needs of their research programs.
- In a decentralized institution, it is even more important than in other structure to keep a list of the administrators that you work with very closely, along with their responsibilities and contact information



“Centralised vs Decentralised Research Management Infrastructure which is best for my Organization ?

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Outline

- Background
- Research Management Infrastructures.
- MRCG at LSHTM Research Management Infrastructure
- Advantages and Disadvantages of Decentralisation
- Conclusion
- Acknowledgements

Background

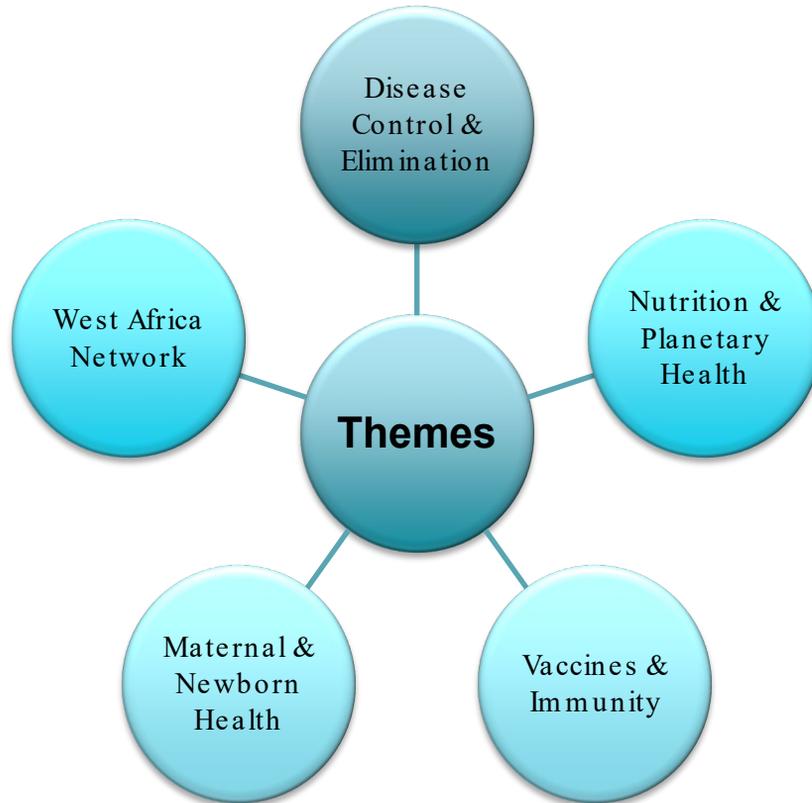
- Research infrastructure in Africa is weak compared to HEIs
- Research is not a prioritised tool to address the health and socio-economic needs of the region.
- Investments in research are insufficient to facilitate research that commensurate to the needs of countries and the region.
- Recent changes in the research ecosystem is changing the research landscape
- Foreign funding support for research since recent pandemics is positively impacting the research ecosystem.
- Investments to support the research infrastructure has brought the need for effective Research Management tools and systems

Research infrastructure at MRCG at LSHTM

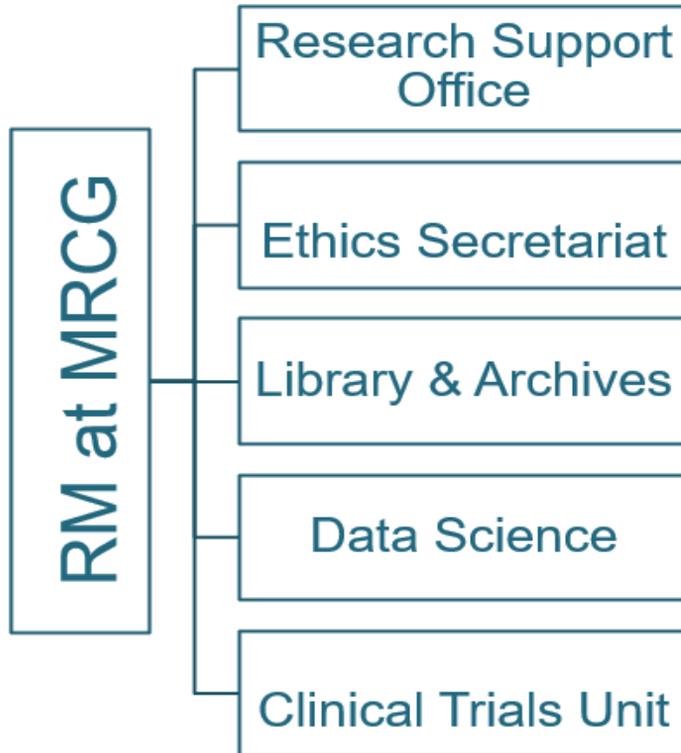
Who we are:

- MRCG is an Africa-based research institution operating in The Gambia since 1947
- Our mission is to lead health research in West Africa, aiming to save lives and improve health across the world.
- Our vision is to be a leading center for scientific research to improve health in low and middle-income countries through innovative laboratory research, clinical studies, and field-oriented science, translating research into clinical and public health practice.
- Our research is internally and externally funded
- We have more over 45 senior and mid-career researchers involved in actively involved in research and a high number of PhDs and Fellows

Research infrastructure at MRCG at LSHTM

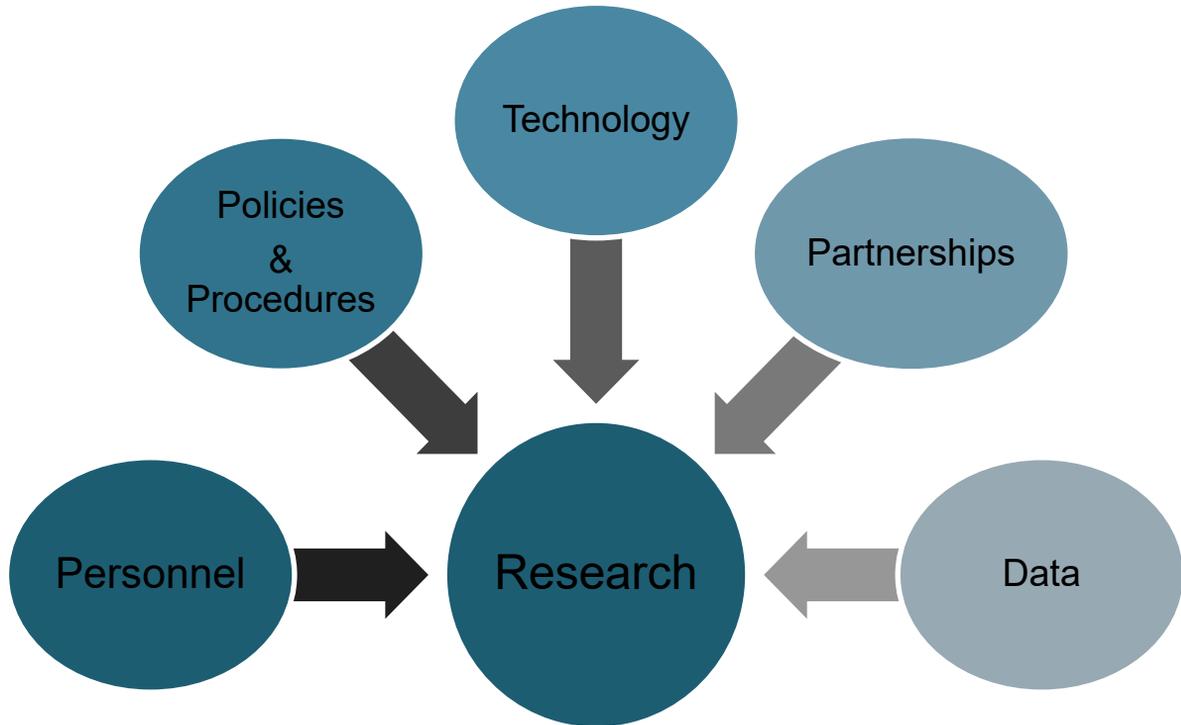


Research Management at MRCG at LSHTM



Research Management at MRCG at LSHTM

Creating the right platform to support research involve:



Decentralised Management – what does it mean in the RM context?

Research is inherently complex, requiring the integration of multiple components to achieve an objective.

A decentralised management structure provides the opportunity to address the increasing complexity of research operations.

The concept of decentralisation involves transferring management authority from top management levels to lower levels.

Decentralisation generally has the potential to enhance efficiency, quality, and innovation.

Recent technological advancements and globalization have enabled the effective sharing of leadership responsibilities to achieve complex objectives.

Defining decentralised management

“Decentralised management is characterized by upper management transferring certain decision-making responsibilities to lower levels and even to individual employees. While top-level managers maintain overall authority and establish policies that guide major company decisions, most decision-making power is delegated to lower levels”.

Why decentralise

Faster decision-making during research implementation

Contextual realities lead to Innovation

Improved Flexibility & Adaptability

Improved Accountability through reporting head office or higher authority

Better Resource Allocation

Innovation helps overcome bureaucratic hurdles

Selecting decentralised management for MRCG at LSHTM

Diversification of the institution's research agenda to include new research priorities

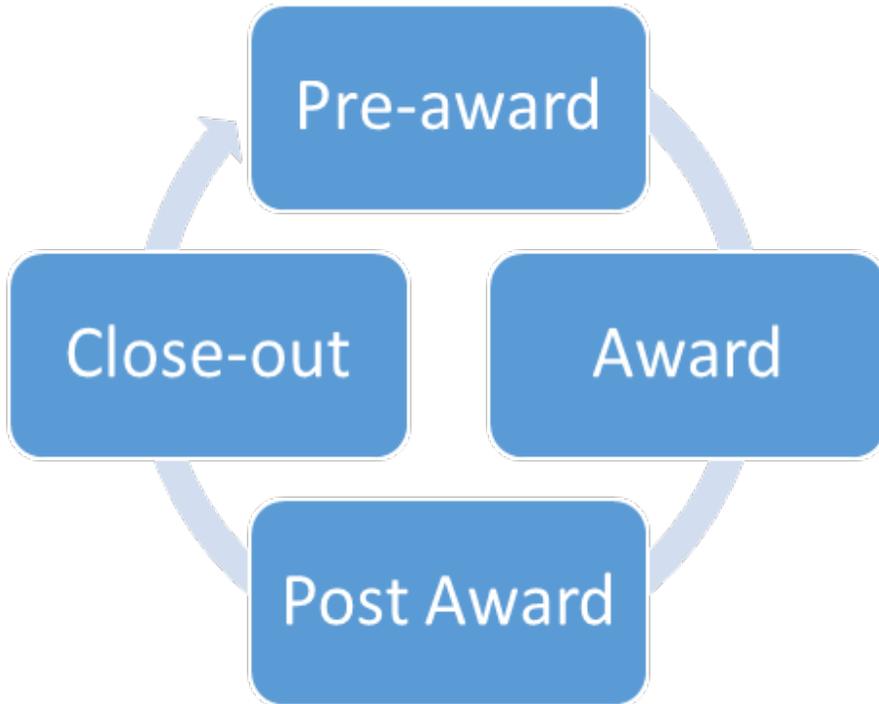
Collaboration and partnerships in research implementation bringing together multiple skills and capacities across zones and regions.

Limited research management professionals available locally, necessitates the recruitment of professionals beyond the territories of The Gambia.

Space and physical structure challenges such as having to prioritise office space between laboratories, clinical and office space for operations.

Attempts to harmonise our processes to meet multiple standards and guidelines (National and International research standards and principles)

Framework for decentralised research management at MRCG at LSHTM



Research Management Structure



MRCG at LSHTM currently seems to operate a mixed research management infrastructure ;



It has established the Research Support Office (RSO) which serves as the unit's main centre for support and guidance in research administration, governance and compliance to funder terms and grant conditions



14 Research Management staff of the RSO are based in the main station of the Unit in Fajara , whilst 3 other staff are based in Basse Field station , about 400KM from Fajara.

Research Management Structure

Each department has its own head of department, and a structure aimed at achieving the service delivery objective of the department.

Delegation of authority is passed from top management to middle managed giving them autonomy to take necessary actions.

Each role within these departments have specific job descriptions to provide individuals with a clear direction and objective to work towards.

Central communication has been strengthened to ensure that lines of communication are not broken and silos created within the system.

Various senior management teams are formed as a platform for managers to catchup with each other.

Research Management Structure

REMSYS: A central RM Tool

This is the MRCG at LSHTM's flagship online research management system; conceptualized and developed entirely with the Unit's resources.

- Captures Project information from Pre-Award to Close-out
- Provides a central repository for all project documentation
- Facilitate online approval process for all grant applications (Paperless process)

Advantages of decentralised RM

Delegation of authority, thereby enabling swift decision-making to tackle issues at the grassroots level

Improved flexibility to ensure all stakeholders are carried along in real time

Helps to reduce office congestion and bureaucratic bottlenecks that may cause delays.

Safeguards departmental autonomy and enables RM department (offices) to establish smooth relationship with other support departments.

Disadvantages of decentralised RM

Inconsistency: Processes and compliance may vary between respective department staff due to distance, working in silos, potentially leading to issues with oversight.



Duplication of Effort: Each department may have to replicate administrative processes, increasing overall workload.



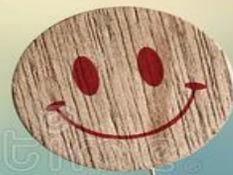
Potential Knowledge Gaps: Decentralized staff may not all be on the same knowledge wavelength and lack specialized expertise in certain areas

CONCLUSION

- The discussion on which RM structure best works for an institution continues unabated
-
- Decision on choosing a particular structure is greatly contextual



THANK
YOU!



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MRCG at LSHTM Data and Development Team

([Robalino 2001](#)).

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