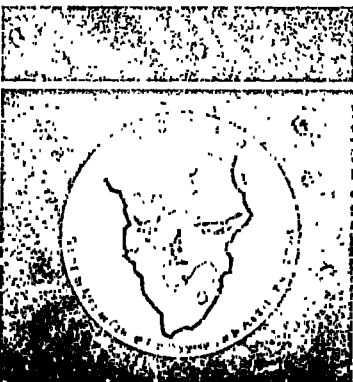


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Recruitment and Selection of Staff in
the Department of Agricultural Research,
Malawi
A Case Study

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RECRUITMENT AND SELECTION OF STAFF IN THE DEPARTMENT OF AGRICULTURAL RESEARCH, MALAWI A CASE STUDY

E. M. Ntokotha

Introduction

Over 85% of the population in Malawi live in rural areas, deriving their livelihood from self-employment in agriculture. It, therefore, follows that agricultural development is very important in Malawi because it affects the welfare of a large proportion of the population and is the backbone of the national economy in the absence of exploitable mineral wealth. The justification for government intervention in this sector is threefold:

1. to ensure self-sufficiency in food production;
2. to provide raw materials for local industries and export;
3. to ensure general development of the country, both socially and economically.

The growing population of Malawi necessitates a substantial growth in food production, particularly of maize, beans, groundnuts, rice, sorghum/millet, cassava, sweet potatoes, and livestock and livestock products. A sharp drop in the production of these commodities means that they must be imported, using scarce foreign exchange, which is also needed for importing such things as fuel, fertilizers, chemicals, vehicles, and equipment. Hence, the emphasis on self-sufficiency in food production.

Some industrial development is emerging in the Malawi economy, notably in the textile and edible-oil industries. Development in the agricultural sector will ensure a steady supply of raw materials for these industries at costs that will enable the products to be sold at competitive prices domestically and internationally.

The development of agriculture carries with it the basic infrastructural development required for the flow of goods and services into rural areas. This development represents a general development in rural areas in terms of roads, health

units, water, electricity, training facilities, and other amenities. Because of the high proportion of the rural population compared to the total population in Malawi, once these areas have been developed, then a large proportion of the country's population will also have been developed.

It is axiomatic that agriculture is critical to the sustained national economic development of Malawi (and most African or third-world countries), especially considering that it contributes about 40% of the gross domestic product and accounts for about 90% of the foreign exchange. It is also axiomatic that technical change is one of the critical elements that determines the pace of agricultural growth in a developing country such as Malawi. Thus, agricultural improvement can be achieved through well-thought-out and coordinated agricultural research programs, developing appropriate technologies to be transferred to target groups. The increasing rate of agricultural development taking place in Malawi has necessitated both the intensification and expansion of the research effort, and with the advent of the National Rural Development Program (NRDP), the department of agricultural research (DAR) has had to provide and will continue to provide baseline data for planning. The overall goal of NRDP is to increase the productivity, quality of life and incomes of smallholder farmers by:

1. increasing the general level of smallholder agricultural production in Malawi for domestic needs, import substitution, and export;
2. increasing agricultural productivity and, consequently, the income and welfare of smallholders by assuring access to needed inputs and services;
3. preserving Malawi's natural resources by encouraging conservation-linked crop production, developing multi-use conservation programs, and developing forestry reserves on customary and estate land.

In order for these goals to be achieved, research must provide the basic information to guide national planners on the validity of the technical assumptions on which their development objectives are based and on choices between technological alternatives (as well as their socioeconomic implications). For this reason, the DAR is charged with the national responsibility for research on all agricultural commodities, with the exception of sugar, tea, and tobacco, through applied and adaptive research. The DAR seeks to provide the means of solving the technical and agronomic problems of national priority to ensure adequate supplies of high-quality food and cash crops for processing and export.

As in all countries, the agricultural research system is only as good as what it produces, which in turn depends on the quality of the research staff since the generation, adaptation and application of research knowledge requires a highly trained and motivated staff of research scientists, research administrators, and support staff. The identification and selection of candidates who have the aptitude to become researchers is of paramount importance in Malawi. The correct selection of future research scientists ensures the necessary foundation for a sound agricultural research system that will develop the technologies fundamental to the economic growth and stability of the agricultural sector.

Historical Development of Research Staffing in the Department of Agricultural Research.

Upon receiving her independence in 1964, Malawi had a human resource base that was insufficient for economic

and social development. Institutional infrastructure for post-secondary training was virtually nonexistent and less than three percent of the budget was spent on education by the government. Similarly, post-secondary agricultural institutions were not in place, and the majority of key positions in the Ministry of Agriculture (MoA) were filled by expatriate personnel, as summarized in table 1.

However, since 1964, there has been a dramatic increase in the development of Malawi's human capital resource. The educational budget now represents 11% of total expenditure, and the resultant development of the University of Malawi system (Chancellor College, Bunda College, and the Polytechnic) since 1964 provides most of the country's essential domestic human resource requirements. Today Bunda College, from which the greater percentage of professional and technical officers are drawn, graduates about 35 degree and 90 to 100 diploma candidates each year. Others, albeit constituting lower numbers, come from Chancellor College and the Polytechnic. The annual output of the Natural Resources College is approximately 250 certificate holders, from which the bulk of the technical assistants is drawn. The present staff situation and deployment in DAR is summarized in table 2 and figure 1.

Present Mechanisms for Recruitment and Selection

The recruitment of individuals of various categories or grades is subject to the availability of positions that need to be filled. The availability of vacant positions is the result of a) resignation, b) termination of service, c) death, d) retire-

Table 1. Staff Situation in the Department of Agricultural Research in 1964

Professional Staff Diploma			Technical Staff Certificate	
PhD	MSc	BSc	Technical Officer	Technical Assistant
3 (All expatriates)	3 (All expatriates)	16 (15 expatriates)	8 (4 expatriates)	Expatriates

Table 2. Staff Situation in the Department of Agricultural Research as of 31 March 1989

Professional Staff Diploma			Technical Staff Certificate	
PhD ¹	MSc ²	BSc ³	Technical Officer	Technical Assistant
9 Malawians 4 Expatriates (USAID) TAs	45 Malawians No expatriates 20 on PhD study leave 13 in USA 6 in UK 1 in Canada	46 Malawians No expatriates 31 on MSc study leave 26 in USA 4 in UK 1 in Nigeria	87 Malawians No expatriates	246 Malawians No expatriates

1. Eight PhDs have moved to other departments, parastatals, and international organizations since 1985.

2. Two MScs have moved to other departments and private organizations.

3. One BSc has moved to another department.

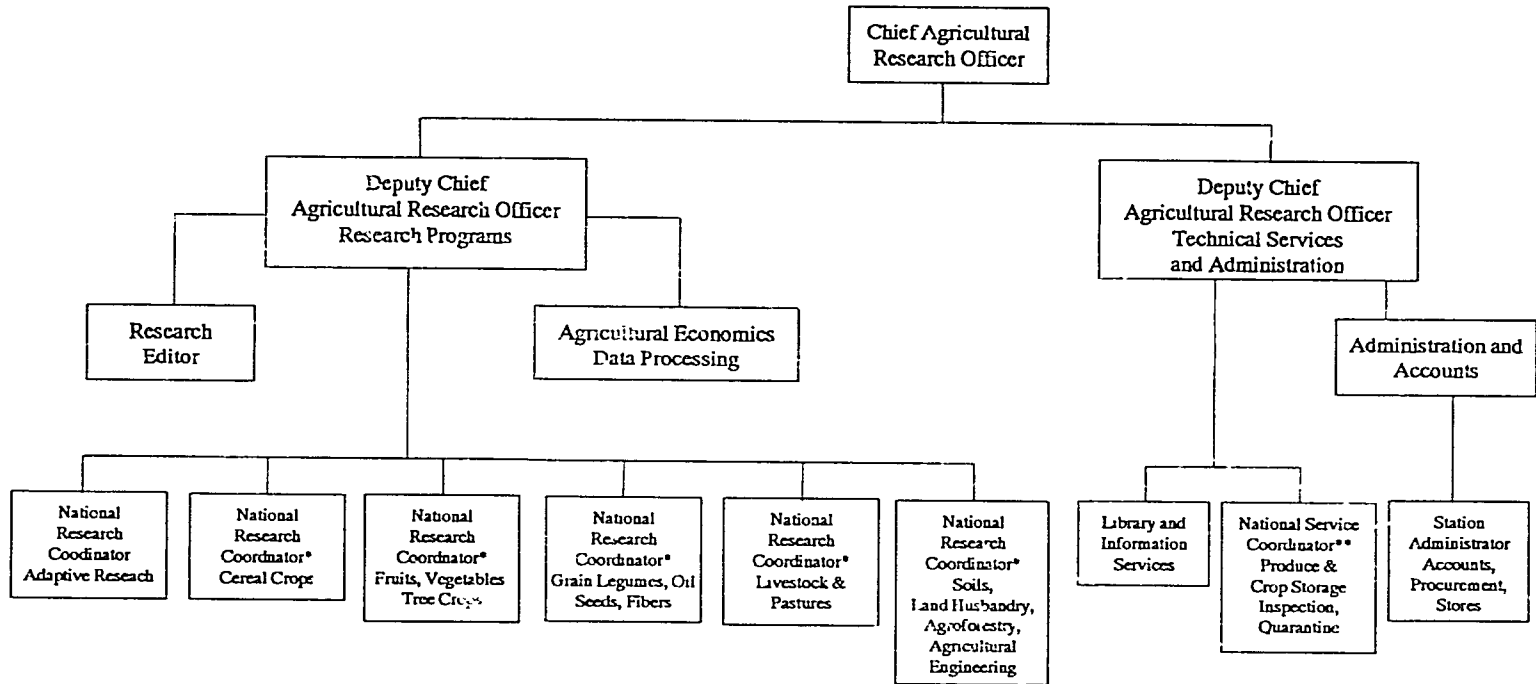


Figure 1. Organizational Structure of the Department of Agricultural Research, Malawi

*Oversee commodity teams.

**Oversees service teams.

ment, and e) expansion of programs. Notwithstanding the fact that accommodation in the civil service is a privilege and not a right, the availability of institutional housing, particularly for junior staff (technical or field assistants), is another factor to take into consideration.

Bodies Entrusted with Recruitment and Selection Exercises

Recruitment and selection of employees working in DAR is conducted by three different bodies, depending upon the required grades of the prospective employees. Three organizations are involved in the exercises:

1. station/departmental recruitment;
2. appointment and disciplinary committee (ADC ministerial recruitment);
3. public service commission recruitment.

Recruitment and Selection Processes

1. Station/Departmental
(Workers recruited by a station in DAR)
 - a. Industrial class employees
 - i. Unclassified workers or laborers
 - ii. Classified workers (grades III to I) (cooks, bartenders, and laboratory/field/livestock attendants, among others)
 - iii. Operators (such as plant operators and motor vehicle and tractor drivers)
 - b. Subordinate-class employees
2. ADC/Ministerial
3. Public Service Commission Recruitment

Unclassified Workers or Laborers

Commodity team leaders, in consultation/liaison with team members, identify the need for laborers to perform specific tasks. They seek approval from the station head to employ laborers. When approval has been granted, they ask the farm manager how many employees are needed, for what kind of work, with what skills and other characteristics, when the employees will be required and for how long. The farm manager then sends word of these vacancies to the communities surrounding the station. The farm manager is also the one who does the selection and hiring. The new employees' personal information is then given to the station payroll officer so that they will be added to the muster or payroll. The farm manager also sends this information to

the commodity team leader who requested that new employees be hired.

Classified Workers and Operators

With this category of employees, the *modus operandi* regarding recruitment and selection is similar to that described for the unclassified workers. In this case, however, there are specific skills and various levels of competence within each group.

Because of the varied nature of skills involved, the need for a particular worker may be identified by the commodity team leader or farm manager (for station maintenance). And since the skills required are of a specialized nature, advertising is usually done through the labor office, where there are records of skilled workers who are looking for jobs. The labor office notifies suitable individuals and makes an appointment for them to come to the station for interviews. Hiring is done by the farm manager. In general, interviewing and hiring workers in this category is the sole responsibility of the farm manager or his representative.

Subordinate Class Employees

This class of employees consist of watchmen, security guards, and messengers. These fall under the station administration, so their recruitment and hiring is done by the administrative officer or his representative. However, the procedure is similar to the procedures involved in the employment of unskilled workers or laborers.

2. ADC/Ministerial Recruitment

Each government ministry has an ADC to which the public service commission has delegated functions relating to employees of the technical/field assistant grade. This group of employees has had two to four years of secondary education prior to undertaking a two-year training course in the more practical and less theoretical aspects of the agricultural sciences.

In the ministry of agriculture, there are six senior officers who represent the various departments and sections: agriculture (1), veterinary medicine (1), agricultural research (1), accounts (1), and personnel (2). The two officers from the personnel section are members of the ADC; the head of the personnel section chairs the ADC while the other acts as the secretary.

When a technical/field assistant is needed at the commodity team level, the commodity team leader takes up the issue with the station head, who will, when satisfied that the need is genuine, take up the matter with the chief agricultural research officer.

When the chief agricultural research officer has confirmed the existence of vacancies, the requirements are submitted

to the ministry of agriculture. When vacancies arise because of an expansion in programs, the ministry of agriculture negotiates with the department of personnel management and training (DPMT) for the creation of the new positions. Then the ministry of finance is requested to make funds available for salaries. In any case, the ministry of agriculture declares the vacant posts to the secretary of the ADC. With the approval of the ADC, the secretary advertises in the press that there are training vacancies at the Natural Resources College (NRC).

Once the secretary's short list is approved by the ADC, the secretary makes arrangement for the candidates to take an aptitude test administered by the Malawi National Examination Board (MANEB). On the basis of the examination results, a number of candidates (usually 10 per vacancy) are selected for oral interviews by boards constituted as follows:

- chairman of the ADC
- an officer from MoA personnel section (secretary)
- a representative from the ministry of agriculture
- a representative from the Natural Resources College
- a representative from any ministry the ADC chooses (perhaps with the exception of the secretary, all members of boards must be senior civil servants of good standing)

The recommendations of the examining boards are considered by the ADC, where the final selection is made. Minutes of the ADC are sent to the public service commission for ratification, with copies to the DPMT for their records. Once ratified by the PSC, the list of selected candidates is released to the principal of the Natural Resources College, who arranges with the ADC secretary to announce the names of the successful candidates and the dates they are to report to college.

In the last term of the second year of training, the principal requests that the chief agricultural research officer confirm his requirements. The principal then selects the required number of new employees from among those interested in joining DAR. At the close of the term, the principal informs those selected to report to DAR. DAR then gives the personal details of these candidates to the personnel office and the accounts section (salary division) of the ministry of agriculture to finalize the employment procedures. The individuals are assigned to the various research stations as requested.

There are several factors that motivate prospective employees in this category and make them want to work for DAR. These include the following:

1. *Location.* Close to Chitende Agricultural Research Station (CARS), which is the biggest in the country and is only about 8 km away from NRC. Field and educational visits are arranged annually for students. Ex-NRC students work at the station, so students visit from time to time and begin to appreciate what the station is all about. Furthermore, prior to moving to the present campus in 1984, the training of these students took place at the then Colby College of Agriculture within the same premises as CARS. This relationship is still active.
2. *Vacation employment.* From time to time a few students are employed at the research stations during their vacations, and their experiences influence them or their fellow students to join DAR.
3. *Training opportunities.* Occasionally, there are opportunities for outstanding students to proceed to Bunda College of Agriculture for a diploma and possibly a degree course. Furthermore, there are opportunities from time to time for members or staff in this category to go on short training courses abroad to gain specific skills at various international training institutes or international agricultural research centers.
4. *Interest in particular subjects or crops.* Students may be interested in a specific field, such as horticulture, which they would like to pursue as a career after college. By joining DAR, they can be certain that sooner or later they will work in their field of interest.

Public Service Commission Recruitment

The public service commission was set up by the government and charged with the responsibility for recruitment of all civil servants in the civil service with as much impartiality as possible. Other attendant responsibilities (executed on the basis of the recommendations of controlling officers) include:

1. granting promotions;
2. confirming appointments of probationers and terminating services of same;
3. granting salary advancements to deserving officers;
4. making critical evaluations of civil servants' career development, resulting in granting or not granting the crossing of efficiency bars.

Because the civil service is large and the volume of work is enormous, it was decided to establish ADCs in all ministries to which the PSC had delegated similar functions (as outlined above) for employees of the technical assistant or certificate grade. The PSC deals with employees of the technical officer or diploma grade and above, itself.

The process of recruitment and selection is similar to the ADC/ministerial process described above. After the need to recruit has been identified, The ministry of agriculture publicizes the vacancies along with job descriptions. The PSC puts out advertisements and arranges interviews. At the interviews, at least two members of the interviewing panel are from the PSC, two are independent (one of whom should be conversant with the nature of the work for which the candidates are being interviewed), and one is a representative of the department of agricultural research.

Almost 90% of the candidates in this group are drawn from Bunda College of Agriculture, and about 10% are from both Chancellor College and the Polytechnic.

A minor difference between the ADC and the PSC is that while the ADC recruits, in the first instance, for pre-employment training, the PSC recruits people who are already trained.

Salary Advancement and Promotions

Salary advancements and promotions are also the result of selections. There are two kinds of salary advancement:

1. accelerated salary advancement
2. crossing of the efficiency bar

There are also two types of promotions:

1. personal
2. regular

Accelerated Salary Advancement

When employees have served the mandatory probationary period of two years and are confirmed in their employment,

and if their performance is considered outstanding, they are rewarded by being given several increments within their salary scale. Usually this happens during the first five years of a career.

Crossing of the Efficiency Bar

Efficiency bars are designed to ensure that civil servants do not continue to receive increments in a long salary scale segment. Exceptions to this occur when individuals have passed prescribed examinations and acquired additional qualifications that would enable them to perform the duties and responsibilities required in higher positions of their salary range. In the absence of examinations, civil servants can cross the efficiency bar if they are considered by their supervising officer and the ADC/PSC to be diligent, efficient, and hardworking.

Personal Promotions

Personal promotions are awarded to civil servants irrespective of the existence of a vacant or substantive post in the next grade to which they are promoted. Usually such promotions are given to government employees who have consistently performed their duties with dedication for a period of 10 years or so.

Regular Promotions

Regular promotions fill a vacant post. The process is similar to the recruitment process described earlier. Announcements of vacancies, with job descriptions attached, are sent to the ADC/PSC. The secretary of the ADC/PSC advertises the positions in the national press and arranges interviews for the short-listed candidates. If a current employee from a position in a lower grade applies for the vacancy and is accepted, then he/she is promoted to the level designated for the vacant position.