



**MASTER CLASS TO BUILD CAPABILITY FOR ADVANCED
RESEARCH**

*BMGF-AERC Building Policy Research Institutions to Support Human
Capital in Africa 'Human Capital Development in Africa' Project*

FINAL PROGRAMME

July 26 – July 28, 2022

Programme Schedule

Day 1: July 26 2022

Registration [8:30- 9:00 (GMT+3)]

Session I: Opening Session [9:00- 10:00 (GMT+3)]

Chair of Session	Abebe Shimeles Director of Research AERC
Welcoming and Opening Remarks	Professor Njuguna Ndung'u , Executive Director, AERC Prof. Lant Pritchett , Oxford University Dan Peters , BMGF

Time/Session	Activity
10:00-10:30	BREAK
Session 1 (10:30-13:00) Moderator: Prof Lant (In-person)	Bayesian Shock: Producing High Impact Research Part I: Types of Bayesian Shock: Technique, Tool, Cutting Edge, Productive Puzzle Posed, Pushing Back, Distinguishing" Part II: Exercise: Why this paper Part III: "Seeing inside the kitchen (not just eating the meal): How high impact research gets made" Part IV: Questions and Answers
13:00 – 14:00	LUNCH
Session II (14:00 - 17:00) Moderator: Prof Yaw (Virtual)	Reading Materials: Suresh Naidu, Yaw Nyarko, Abu Dhabi Shing-Yi Wang (2016). Monopsony Power in Migrant Labor Markets: Evidence from the United Arab Emirates, Journal of Political Economy, 2016, vol. 124, no. 6
17:00	BREAK
Day 11	July 27 2022
Session III (9:00 – 10:30) Moderator: Prof Lant	Assignments and reflections
10:30 – 11:00	BREAK
11:00 – 13:00	Assignments and reflections
13:00 – 14:00	LUNCH

Time/Session	Activity
Session IV (14:00 - 19:00) Moderator: Prof James Robinson(Virtual)	14:00 – 15:30 : Reading materials ✓ Nunn, Nathan and Leonard Wantchekon (2011) “The Slave Trade and the Origins of Mistrust in Africa,” <i>American Economic Review</i> , 101 (7): 3221-3252. ✓ Lowes, Sara, and Eduardo Montero (2021) “Concessions, Violence, and Indirect Rule: Evidence from the Congo Free State”. <i>Quarterly Journal of Economics</i> , 136, 4, 2047-2091.
	15:30 – 16:00: BREAK
	16:00 – 18:00 : 1. Asking a Question 2. Proposing a parsimonious hypothesis. 3. Moving to a research design. 4. Worrying about causality.
Day 11I	July 28 2022
Session V (9:00 – 13:00) Moderator: Prof Lant	Assignments and Wrap up sessions with researchers
10:30 – 11:00	BREAK
11:00 – 13:00	Assignments and wrap up sessions with researchers
13:00 – 14:00	LUNCH
Session VI(14:00 - 15:00) Moderator: Abebe Shimeles	Floor Discussions
Way forward (15:00 – 16:00)	Abebe Shimeles, Prof. Lant

Concept Note

AERC Master Class to Build Capability for Advanced Research

The African Economic Research Consortium (AERC), founded in 1988, is the region’s premier organization dedicated to building the capacity to bring rigorous and relevant evidence to bear on economic policy challenges through research, training and policy outreach.

The challenge of building capability for advanced research. The capability to do research in Africa has expanded enormously since 1988. There are now a significant number of individuals, universities, and think-tanks producing high quality policy relevant research. The challenge is for African researchers, those in Africa and beyond, is to break through to the next level: producing research which not only examines issues for their relevance to African policy issues but also advances the global literature in their domain. The next level will be African researchers not just using economics to learn about Africa and help cope with its policy challenges but also bring the varied experiences within Africa to bear on advancing global understanding of economics and its policy application.

A rough and ready, scale of 1 to 10, classification the quality and impact of academic research as *academic research*, helps illustrate the challenge in capacity building.

Level	Description	Typical publication/citations
1-2: Basic techniques	Solid, well-done, research using well known techniques for theory or empirical data description and analysis (e.g. OLS)	Internal reports, working papers, contracted research, master’s theses. Citation range: rarely >0
3-4: Advanced technique only	Research using more advanced theoretical or empirical techniques (e.g. Probit/Logit, Heckman selection models, IV, RDD, RCTs) but applied to questions/topics for which similar work has been done and producing results similar to the ‘conventional wisdom’	Working papers, PhD theses, lower tier journals Citation range: median≈0, <50
5-6: Advancing the literature	Research that advances the existing state of knowledge in the (sub)field, changing the beliefs/views of experts in the relevant community of practice and/or pioneers new methods with wide range of application.	Top tier field journals (perhaps top 5 journals) Citation range 50 to 500
7-8: Breakthrough papers	Research that causes a large shift in views about an important topic/debate in the (sub)field, often opening up pathways for new research.	Top tier to top 5 Citation range: 500 to 5000
9-10: Global reputation making	Research that often create new approaches or sub-fields within a discipline, shift a paradigm, create large scope for follow-on “normal” science (in the sense of Kuhn)	Top 5 journals Citation range: 5000+

The challenge facing research capacity in many developing regions, including, but not limited to Africa, is that the standard approaches to “training” through in-person or on-line classes can produce researchers who can implement techniques and who can produce research in the 1-2 (Basic Techniques) and 3-4 (Advanced technique only) range of quality. That level of research, that gets the facts right and creates a common empirical understanding of the facts and of the associations among variables is very important to policy making. Doing this level of research well and drawing correct conclusions from this research is hard, and this capability is not to be ignored or taken for granted.

However, researchers can be capable of implemented advanced *techniques* but not yet really be *advancing* the literature in their (sub)field. In order to produce papers that *advance the literature* a piece of research has to address questions that are *important* and *interesting* in a *persuasive* way. A heuristic way to think of this is producing a paper that has a substantial “Bayesian shock” for the sub-field, in either substance or method, that is it changes the beliefs of people central to the sub-field.

The skills and capability of producing research of the quality levels of 5-6 (*Advancing the literature*) or 7-8 (*Breakthrough papers*) can be taught, but they are not amenable to standard textbooks or to the standard teaching of technique. Like the advanced training that produces experts in any craft, the training has to go beyond technique. What is an *interesting and important* question requires judgment and expertise. This capability can be acquired, but which has to be consciously acquired. Devising a way to craft a research approach that will make a *persuasive* advance on the existing literature also requires judgment and expertise that can be acquired, but which also has to be consciously acquired.

Often research proposals stipulate *what* the research to be done is (e.g. a theory, a model, a simulation, an estimate of some kind) and *how* the research will be done (e.g. with what data and using which techniques) but it is unclear on what the anticipated *impact* the research will have on the existing “conventional wisdom” and hence how the research will advance the collective understanding of the relevant phenomena. Again, just as a rough and ready way of putting the challenge, research proposals rarely say explicitly: “Here is why I/we believe that the output of this research will be a paper that will attract over 100 citations.”

The importance of building capability for advanced research. There two reasons why building capability for advanced research in Africa is important.

First, in academic disciplines these days citations are the “coin of the realm” and to build African research organizations into globally recognized excellence African researchers need to be able to not just produce papers but also produce papers that attract the attention and interest and recognition that come through citations.

Second, and more deeply important, researchers doing basic or advanced technique research are often just bringing concepts and theories and empirical techniques that have been created elsewhere and applying them to an African context. Hence the standard approach asks “What can

be learned *about* African realities from applying theories and models and concepts and empirical approaches developed elsewhere to Africa?” The “advance the literature” approach asks “What can be learned *from* African realities that shapes and extends the understandings in the global theories and models and concepts?”

Master classes in capability for advanced research. In fields that have an important creative and craft-like elements to advanced capability the most common way of transmitting these intangible skills is through extended apprenticeships in small group/one-on-one exposures to master craftsmen, a “mentoring” approach and the transmission of the craft wisdom is often implicit. This approach is impossible to replicate at scale and takes a very, very, long time.

An alternative that helps address an important lacuna in capacity building, would be a series of “master classes.” The basic idea of a master-class is four-fold.

First, identify people, preferentially, but not necessarily, people who are African or who have worked extensively in Africa, who have produced “advanced” or “breakthrough” papers with some regularity, and have them lead a masterclass.

Second, the first part of a master-class would be to take a specific paper produced by the presenter. The master-class participants would read that paper in advance. Then, rather than talk about the findings or the methods of the paper, as in an ordinary seminar, the presenter would use that paper to have a “meta” class about how to produce a high impact piece of research.

The presenter would be asked to talk about *how* they went about identifying that there was an important and interesting question to be addressed and *how* they went about structuring their research methods so that that question could be addressed persuasively. Thus, this would be a presentation not about findings themselves or about the techniques used but about the “secrets” of the craft of producing high impact/high citation (5-10 quality) papers.

Third, the second part of the master class would be the presenter taking an existing AERC funded proposal and working with the authors in a session open to other researchers with related funded proposals to work through questions about their research. What do they think is the interesting and important question the research will answer? Why do they think that their question is interesting and important to the existing literature (beyond just that this particular technique has not yet been done in country X)? What is new/unique/different about their approach (data, method, context) that will address persuasively this interesting and important question? How can they (re)structure their approach in a way that is likely to produce high impact research?

Fourth, would be follow up sessions. As the presenters are necessarily those who produce high impact research their time has very high opportunity cost (and markets often work to also make it expensive). But the idea is to have other people follow the series of master-classes and work with the researchers who engaged with the presenters and with those who attended on follow-up exercises on what was learned and how it can be applied to their current and future research. These follow up exercises will be important to hone and practice the skills and approaches suggested.

Current opportunity for AERC. The AERC currently has an ongoing research project on Human Capital in Africa. That project has both (a) generated a set of framework papers by leading global

authors and (b) solicited, reviewed, and identified a set of about a dozen fundable research projects by African authors as part of the capacity building part of the project. This creates a opportunity to run, in a very expedited time-frame, a set of master-classes with the already identified researchers of the funded proposals. This could be a very important chance to try out a new approach, the master class, to a big challenge, moving researchers from capability for advanced technique to actually advancing the literature.