

TAPPING THE POTENTIALS OF NETWORKING AND COLLABORATION TO ENHANCE FUNCTIONALITY AND SELF – RELIANCE FOR GRADUATES OF TERTIARY EDUCATION INSTITUTIONS

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Abstract

This paper attempts to define the key concepts of networking, collaboration, tertiary institution, functionality and self reliance. It further *x-rays the problems of funding and resource* insufficiency in the running of tertiary institutions in Nigeria and the need and urgency for the institutions to adopt networking and collaboration strategies, as a way forward to ensure that they produce functional and self reliant graduates. Possible areas, types, strategies and guidelines for success in institutional networking and collaboration are enumerated and discussed. Finally, the rationale and potentials of networking and collaboration as instruments that may renew our tertiary institutions, so as to be in a position to produce functional and self reliant graduates, are stressed.

Introduction

A network is an arrangement of intersecting, horizontal and vertical lines, or chain of connected computers or broadcasting stations connected for simultaneous broadcasting. Networking is an exchange of information amongst group of institutions for professional or social purposes. In the context of this paper, networking could be defined as working together , having connection or sharing information amongst tertiary institutions that are connected electronically, through ICT. It is viewed as a system that is designed to provide member institutions the opportunity of sharing and managing information.

Collaboration, on the other hand, is about working together for same purpose. Fatusi and Popoola (2010) defined collaboration as the working relationship of organizations, groups or individuals who have similar roles or interest in achieving a common goal. They further agreed that collaboration is a recursive process where

two or more people, organizations or institutions work together in an intersection of common goal. Commonwealth of Learning (2010) view institutional collaboration as sharing resources of any type with two or more partners or institutions. They posited that collaboration may be between institutions in same neighbourhood, state, within the same country or region and any where in the world. For purposes of this discourse, we shall view collaboration as sharing of resources of any type amongst two or more tertiary institutions. Tertiary institutions, in the context of this paper, are viewed as education at the polytechnics, colleges of education/ agriculture and the universities. This is different from education at the primary or secondary school level.

Functionality on the other hand, is about practicality. Functionality is the quality of being very suitable for the purpose it is designed. In the context of this paper, the question would be, is the average graduate of our tertiary institution functional and self-reliant?

That brings us to the issue of self reliance. Self reliance is about self sufficiency. It is independent, able to do or decide things by self rather than depend on other people. Today, in Nigeria, we are all aware that an average graduate of our tertiary institutions is far from being self reliant. They just cannot hold their own in the field, the industries and the labour market. Different companies and industries are complaining openly that these graduates are unable to perform (Ahiuma-Young,2010).He reported also that the Chemical and Non- Metallic Product Industries in Nigeria expressed concern over what it termed increasing skill deficit in the country represented by large population of unemployable college graduates. This may be largely due to poor funding and total lack of

resources, in most of the tertiary institutions that produced these graduates. The truth is that the graduates of these institutions are only true products of the educational environments that produced them. For it is said that “man is a product of his environment”.

Problems of Poor Funding, Lack of Resource and Way Forward for Tertiary Institutions

Paucity of funding and other educational resources are common problems bothering administrators of tertiary institutions all over the world especially in Nigeria. There is no single tertiary institution today in Nigeria that can boast of sufficiency in funding or availability/adequacy of resources. Educational institutions world wide are experiencing funding cuts even as global need for training in skills and for professional upgrading increases (Commonwealth of Learning, 2010). They conclude that providing course programmes is one of the proven ways institutions meet higher training demands, yet coming up with the funding and resources for both traditional as well as distance education services remain a concern. In the same vein, Ofoefuna & Eya (1999) posited that, owing to the cost of some instructional resources, funding and resources are not easily available in Nigerian educational institutions.

Tertiary institutions, as funded today in Nigeria, may not produce functional and self reliant graduates with the limitations imposed by the present Nigerian economy (Anidi, 2004). There is therefore the need and urgency for the institutions to employ the strategies of networking and collaboration amongst themselves to bridge the gaps that may so exist. Many institutions are sharing their financial, administrative, instructional burdens with others on local, national and global level (Commonwealth of Learning, 2010). This may help the institutions to begin to perform, more effectively and may begin to produce more functional and self reliant graduates.

Possible Areas, Types and Strategies of Networking and Collaboration

Tertiary institutions can share anything, from funding, programmes to media. Institutions must not have similar interests or level of expertise to collaborate or network, but they do need to have resources that other institutions would like to share in collaboration. Commonwealth of Learning (2010) stated that institutions can share the following: Infrastructure, Knowledge and Expertise, Human resource, Services, Cost of starting or maintaining educational programmes, Institutional Culture and Perspective. They added that collaboration is possible in almost all areas – administration, advertising, certification, curriculum design, curriculum development, including choice of media- print, audio, video and internet, end-term evaluation, library support, student admission/selection and student support/ academic counseling. At the tertiary level, international video conferencing courses are becoming common (Mason, 1994). He posited that networking activities across national boundaries are of different types :

- Franchise Type, where one partner designs, develops, examines and makes awards while the other provides students support,
- Marketplace Type, where one institution purchases course materials from the other; adapts, delivers and examines learners and awards credits,
- Collaborative Type, where several institutions jointly design and develop course which they use in their respective institutions, independent of each other, and
- Technology-Based Type, where students from other countries access the host institution via electronic communication.

The initial set-up cost for ICT used can be high, facilities like email, chat and conferencing audio, video or computer

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technologies provide communication and are nearly as good as face-to-face. Through electronic networking, it is possible to be in a quasi-permanent contact with any group or individual from any part of the world.

There are also various strategies of collaboration in education. In this regard, Adigwe (1978) reported that the Institute of Management and Technology, (IMT) Enugu, in 1976, collaborated with then Anambra Broadcasting Service (ASBS) to establish the present IMT/ESBS Poly-Air programme. He further stated that the programme started as a joint venture between IMT and ESBS. Anidi (2004) confirmed that the IMT/ESBS Poly-Air programme set aside four hours for education broadcast a day, while providing set books for learners with supplement of face-to-face on Saturdays, Telephone and posted services were also used for the programme. Denison University and Kenyon College collaborated on diverse faculty- driven curricular projects, using technology (Scott, 2003). He confirmed that the programme comprised of three major elements, namely; exploratory workshops, colloquia in the disciplines, and peer-reviewed funding for collaborative projects. He pointed out that the face-to face contacts during the colloquia are by far the most important element in fostering the collaborative project.

In another report, Kenya Agricultural Research Institute KARI (2009) revealed that during a pilot phase of Kenya Agriculture Information Network (KAINET) positioned itself to take advantage of the available and emerging opportunities in establishing a system for information sharing in four key agricultural research, extension and academic institutions within the country, namely :

- Jomo Kenyetta University of Agriculture (JKUAT)
- Kenya Agricultural Research Institute (KARI)
- Kenya Forestry Institute(KAFRI) and

- Ministry of Agriculture (MOA).

They further revealed that through KAINET, the four pilot institutions established mechanisms of capturing information, storing it and standardizing it for sharing, first, with respective institutions on their websites, and ,subsequently, harvesting of the same information in a national repository for sharing nationally, regionally, and globally. As at today, four more institutions have joined the network.They are:

- Association for Strengthening Research in Agriculture in East and Central Africa (ASARECA)
- Department for International Development (DFID)
- CAB International and
- Food and Agricultural Organisation of the United Nations (FAO).

Collaborative strategies can come in any form. Institutional collaboration can also be formed through a consortium. An educational consortium is an association of several institutions on a joint education venture that is funded, governed and staffed by partner members and the stakeholders (Commowearth of Learning, 2010) They argued that a consortium provides an effective framework and support system for inter-institutional sharing and collaboration, and help institutions develop co-operatives on internal and external institutional policy. They insist that, for a consortium to work, it must have the following:

- Clear mission statement that reflects the interest of all partners
- A shared, on-going governance structure with clearly defined roles of each member
- The firm support of all partners
- A funding policy agreed upon by all partners.
- Short term as well as long term benefits to all partners.

Guideline for Success for Institutional Networking and Collaboration

The Commonwealth of Learning (2010) listed some guidelines for success in networking and collaboration. They include:

- Confirm Institutional Commitment
- Acknowledge and reward stakeholders
- Adapt materials for local use
- Create a quality control agency
- Streamline course material procedure
- Ensure programme content is current
- Keep administration in-house
- Conduct joint marketing strategies
- Sign-up a pro-active ICT policy
- Ensure fairly similar levels of ICT availability and accessibility
- Ensure technology literacy, and
- Ensure commitment to ICT use.

Institutions involved in networking and collaboration can indeed employ a lot of strategies to ensure they meet their common goals. Usually, institutions in partnership have the elements of a predetermined understanding to formalize the arrangement and have a common knowledge and understanding. A memorandum of understanding is usually prepared and signed by both parties assigning areas of collaboration. This instrument is prepared to ensure that at whatever level of collaboration, consideration should be given to areas of strength of the organization that wants to collaborate and forge partnership so that at the end of implementation of an activity, service or programme, when stock is taken and evaluated, both parties will have beneficial effects of the outcome of the venture (Fatusi and Popoola, 2010).

There are also different stages and procedure of developing collaboration between partnering institutions. Purdue University (2010) suggested a quick guide for developing partnership activities, as listed below;

- i) A letter of intent - this is the most basic document, reflecting that parties

/institutions are interested in collaboration. It does not involve money.

- ii) An activity Agreement - this is usually a fairly complicated document because it typically involves money; example is an agreement for an exchange programme between institutions.

- iii) A Memorandum of Understanding (MOU) - this instrument is signed by the Chief Academic Officer of the respective institutions.

A typical MOU document reflects the under listed:

- a. Type of ties currently existing
- b. Areas of activity (s) of mutual interest
- c. Respective institutional priorities
- d. Benefits of the partnership to each institution
- e. Confirm that the necessary dedicated funds are available
- f. Measurable outcome to be assessed

Rationale and Potentials of Networking and Collaboration for Functional and Self Reliant Tertiary Education

Sharing educational resources and programmes within, between and across institutions is becoming more common in recent times (Mason, 1994). UNESCO (1998) reported that, through collaboration, knowledge can be shared faster, while change and progress can be induced in society. In response to the challenge of funding and lack of resources, many educational institutions are sharing their financial, administrative and infrastructural burden with others on a local, national, regional and global level (Commonwealth of Learning, 2010).

There are many tertiary institutions within Enugu and the entire South East of Nigeria. These institutions are having similar

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problems of poor funding and lack of resources as their counterparts elsewhere in the world but these tertiary institutions seem to have failed to tap on the potentials of networking and collaboration.

Today, many tertiary institutions are embarking on networking and collaborative ventures to fill the gap that may exist in their system. Many small undergraduate colleges aspire to similar curricular goals, yet lack opportunities to share resources in ways that could help them meet these common goals (Scott, 2003). He argued that these campuses go it alone by choice or lack of information about other solutions to their common challenges. He further revealed that Consortia have made progress in sharing administrative services in the following areas:

- Availability of specialized courses that otherwise could not be offered by a single campus
- Opportunity to share the development of curricular materials with colleagues on another campus
- Access to faculty expertise for independent research projects as guest lecturers, or as sabbatical or leave replacements even for single courses
- Pooled enrollment for courses that might otherwise be cancelled
- Greater awareness of neighboring campuses in terms of faculty expertise and interests, student culture, curricular requirements
- New and renewed connections with faculty colleagues that lead to a host of enhancements for students.

There are various benefits institutions can derive from networking and collaboration. Commonwealth of Learning (2010) posited that institutions collaborate primarily to share financial burden of developing, providing and maintaining educational resources. They stressed that institutions that benefit most from

networking and collaboration are from small developing nations that lack the individual expertise or fund to design course material or to maintain a wide range of services. Some of the benefits they enumerated include:

- ◆ **Resource sharing and flexibility:** Institutions can develop and offer a wide range of quality human, academic or technology resources through collaboration for a relatively low cost. For example, some institutions cannot afford a programme or course if its enrollment number is low. However, a low – enrollment programme may still be made available through an arrangement with another institution at which the programme is in high demand.
- ◆ **Growth of Institutional Culture:** Collaboration and networking help institutions implement new and often progressive ideas. Inter- institutional collaboration often means working with people of different culture, value system or religion. Institutions benefit intellectually from an infusion of global culture.
- ◆ **Raising quality of Programme:** Institutions in collaboration benefit from sharing “quality-building” processes and techniques such as admissions, course design and learning support. For example, UNESCO-initiated “World Declaration of Education for All” International Convention, Jomtien, Thailand in 1990 and in Dakar Senegal in 2000, helped nations share and develop tools for assessing their educational activities.

In pursuance of the need and urgency for educational institutions to begin to adopt the strategies of networking and collaboration, UNESCO (1998) in Articles 15 and 17 declared as follows:

- a. The principle of solidarity and true partnership amongst higher education institutions world wide is crucial for education and training in all fields that

- encourage an understanding of global issues...
- b. The principles of international co-operation based on solidarity, recognition and mutual support, true partnership that equitably serves interests of the partners and the value of sharing knowledge and know-how across borders should govern relationships among higher education institutions in both developed and developing nations and should benefit the least developed countries in particular.
 - c. Regional and International normative instruments for recognition of studies should be ratified and implemented including certification of skills, competences and ability of graduates, making it easier for students to change courses in order to facilitate mobility within and between systems.
 - d. Partnership and alliances amongst stake holders – natural and institutional policy makers, teaching and related staff, researchers and students, and administrative and technical personnel in institutions of higher education, the world of work, community group – is a powerful force in managing change....Henceforth, partnership based on common interest, mutual respect and credibility, should be a prim matrix for renewal in education.

May be, in response to the UNESCO declaration, Julia (2002) reported that, from a researcher- collaboration perspective, African researchers have to have opportunities to learn from the international community and themselves. She further revealed that the International Association for Social Science Information Services and Technology (IASSIST) possesses the resources and intellectual capacity to play a more meaningful role in information

sharing and exchange of best practices in Africa...She insisted that there is an urgency to begin and strengthen linkages between African Institutions and IASSIST- linked institutions abroad. In addition, she asserted that closer collaborations amongst institutions/ universities etc. could assist in enhancing the existing professional working relationship.

As at present in Nigeria, one is in doubt whether the tertiary institutions are tapping on these inherent potentials of networking and collaboration. It has also become necessary and urgent, for researchers to find out areas and levels of networking and collaboration, in tertiary institutions in Enugu State?

Our tertiary education administrators and researchers must begin now to consider sharing experiences, values and potentials of networking and collaboration, use them to renew and re-invigorate our tertiary educational system. In line with this, UNICA (2009) reported that the Institutional Network of Universities from the Capitals of Europe is a network of forty two (42) universities, gathering main Higher Education Institutions in European capital cities, whose activities cover the following areas: internalisation and mobility – staff and faculty members; Education – laboratory, best practices, joint programmes, admissions, recognition and free movement; Research and Development – Ph.D, M.ed, Seminars and Research; Policy and Strategy; and Mission and Link with Society. They revealed that the collaboration was founded in 1990 on the initiative of Universite Libre de Bruxelles. In addition, the network has a combined strength of over 120,000 staff and 1,500,000 students, with a clear mission of promoting academic excellence, integration and co-operation among its member universities throughout Europe. In conclusion, they confirmed that the collaboration is today a driving force in the development and integration of universities from Central and Eastern Europe into the European Higher Education Areas.

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Meantime, tertiary institutions in Enugu, Nigeria, such as the Institute of Management and Technology (IMT), Enugu State University of Science and Technology (ESUT), Enugu State College of Education (Technical) (ESCET) and The University of Nigeria Enugu Campus are independently hosting an internet portal. Each bore and is still bearing the cost and the burdens of installing and maintenance of each of the platforms. This is not in keeping with current networking literature. Each would have saved a lot of her lean resources if they networked and collaborated amongst themselves. Each would have started to benefit from sharing information, knowledge, culture and experience as also revealed by literature. In this regard, also Fatusi and Popoola (2010) reported that the collaboration (training – short course on leadership and management in school health programme) between Obafemi Awolowo University, (UNICEF), Government, Civil Society Organisations(CSOs) benefited partners in the following ways: Knowledge Sharing, Learning and Building Consensus, Obtaining Resources, Recognition and Reward, Free Flow of Communication, Team Building for Solving Problems, Improvement Performance in Project Implementation and Project Management.

Generally, education and tertiary education, especially, seem to be the primary and dominant industry of Enugu State. The state has cluster of tertiary institutions, such as UNEC, ESUT, IMT, ESCET, OSISATECH, CARITAS University, Rennissance University, Godfrey Okoye Memorial University, etc., all poorly funded and lack resources, and so should take advantage of the cluster /proximity in networking and collaboration. Each may have something to offer and share in common amongst themselves. It is time for our tertiary institutions to stop *ike otu onye* – man alone, break away from complexes (inferiority or superiority) of the past and tap on the potentials of networking and collaboration.

The importance and potentials of networking and collaboration cannot be overemphasized. On a related issue, the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organisation (UNESCO) chair programme was launched by UNESCO in 1991 as an institutional network plan, to strengthen inter-university cooperation amongst higher education and scientific institutions world wide (UNESCO,2010) .They stressed further that the programme serves to promote linking arrangements among institutions world wide, reinforcing existing sub-regional and inter-regional cooperation networks, and to develop centers of excellence for specialized studies and advanced research, aimed at the following:

- ◆ Institutional development of universities in all regions of the world
- ◆ Increased solidarity amongst the world academic community
- ◆ Rapid transfer of knowledge and know-how
- ◆ Better distribution of excellence and expertise for sustainable development world wide and
- ◆ Enhance contribution of higher education to society

The rationale and potentials of networking and collaboration amongst our tertiary institutions cannot be over-emphasized. Terra consortium was formed in November, 1997, following the collaboration of PAT96 (the Pan- American course on conservation and management of Earthen Architectural and Archeological Heritage) the International Center for Earth Construction – School of Architecture of Grenoble (CRATerre-EAG), the Getty Conservation Institute (GCI), and the International Center for the study of the preservation and the Restoration of Cultural Property (ICCROM) initiated discussion to establish a joint programme in the study of earthen architecture (UNESCO, 2010). They reported also that these organizations recognized

through their independent and collective activities in the earthen architecture conservation that the most successful means of leveraging resources and developing the field was through partnership.

Therefore, it is indeed timely and proper for tertiary institutions in Nigeria to begin to collaborate, – network and share resources and experiences in common so as to fill the gap that may exist in the system. Collaboration and networking are cost-effective, help to maximize resource, expand communication, knowledge and make for sustenance of resource. It can bring about the much-needed functionality and self reliance of the system and graduates of our tertiary institutions become a powerful tool that may usher in the much needed change/renewal and development of our society. This is in keeping with literature, research and tradition. *Anyu-ko mamili onu, ogbaa ufu-fu* (an Igbo proverb, literally meaning 'Collective urination ensures that it foams'). *Igweh-bu-ike*, Together, we triumph!

Conclusion

Owing to the problems of funding and resource insufficiency in the running of our tertiary institutions in Nigeria, there is an urgent need for our tertiary institutions to tap on the enormous and inherent potentials of collaborations and networking amongst the tertiary institutions. It can renew, include, reinvigorate, empower, refocus and reposition our tertiary institutions graduates so as to be more functional and self-reliant

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