

Unmasking the Role of Collaboration and Partnerships in Open and Distance Learning Systems

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Abstract: Central to successful organisations is a powerful sense of collaboration and partnerships. The study sought to unmask the role of collaboration and partnerships in Open and Distance Learning. It was prompted by noticeable challenges that ODL systems are facing in providing quality service to the customers. The study was qualitative by nature and employed the descriptive survey design. Open-ended questionnaire and semi-structured interviews were used as the main data gathering instruments. A purposive sample comprising of lecturers, stakeholders and students was made. The major findings of the study were that collaboration and partnerships play a major role in resource mobilization, capacity building, relationship building, training and development of staff, opportunity to engage in attachments in companies, improvement of educational quality, provision of suitable curricula and meeting various stakeholder demands, among others. The major recommendation is that ODL institutions should collaborate and partner with various stakeholders like business people, companies, governments, alumni and other universities.

Key words: Collaboration • Partnerships • Open and Distance Learning systems

INTRIDUCTION

Most ODL institutions collaborate with one another through COL in developing and sharing their academic programmes. Almost all institutions have links with regional and international associations and organisations [1]. Collaboration plays a pivotal role in tackling pressing social and environmental issues. Partnerships between organisations are becoming one of the most visible aspects of any organisation's social responsibility agenda [2].

Collaborative partnerships are important for ODL providers in that they reduce the cost of introducing new technologies and also improve the quality of developing programmes. By forming appropriate partnerships with other ODL institutions, ODL institutions can secure external content experts and teaching support. Partnerships with professional organisations may help create quality programmes, recruit students and build capacity for ODL practices. Finding creative ways to share resources and expertise will be the key issue in forming partnerships with other organisations. These relationships engage the partners on an ongoing basis and are often strongly project-oriented [3].

Partnerships are promoted in the belief that cooperative relationships provide the potential to achieve significant social benefits through joint action [4]. In addition to tackling pressing global issues, the case for partnerships argues that bringing together unique and complementary resources can benefit the various participants in the collaboration.

For effective collaboration, a strong network system is required. A network... is a group of organisations working together to solve problems or issues of mutual concern that are too large for any one organisation to handle on its own [5]. The idea of networks suggests that organisations working together in a collaborative effort would be more effective in enhancing organisational capacity and improving student learning than individual organisations working on their own [6, 7].

[8] drew on research into professional learning communities to define 'Networked Learning Communities' in terms of knowledge transfer, professional learning and their position between central and local educational structures:

Networked Learning Communities are purposefully led social entities that are characterized by a commitment to quality, rigour and a focus on outcomes.

They promote the dissemination of good practice, enhance the professional development of teachers, support capacity building in schools, mediate between centralised and decentralised structures and assist in the process of re-structuring and re-culturing educational organisational systems [9].

Network structures are probably the most popular way of distinguishing networks from other organisational forms. [10] use a 'fisherman's net' metaphor to describe the structure of a network of individuals. A fisherman's net is based on threads which are knotted together. In a network of individuals the 'threads' that link people together and represent the 'soft' part of the network structure, are the relationships, communications and trust that links people. The 'knots' provide the 'harder' part of the structure and are the activities that bring people in the network together, meeting and events. The metaphor stresses the interaction of these two sorts of structures because it is this interaction that gives the 'net' attains its structural strength. The leaders of organisational networks therefore have to ensure that they develop both types of structures to hold people in the network and allow them to work the net effectively.

Organisational networks also require structures that interact with and between, the internal structures that organise what happens within individual organisations. These structures, such as network conferences, cross-organisational meetings and intervisitations provide the means to develop the 'soft' aspects of the network structure that bring people together, the professional relationships, while at the same time creating the 'hard' structures, the knots which provide the opportunity for joint working and effective collaboration.

Our argument is, in common with research on communities of practice [11] and professional learning communities [12], that effective collaborative learning occurs when four key processes are in place and are effectively intermeshed both vertically and horizontally within and between organisations and institutions:

- Leadership
- Co-ordination and administration
- Joint learning and practice development
- Knowledge and practice transfer

A partnership is a shared commitment, where all partners have a right and an obligation to participate and will be affected equally by the benefits and disadvantages arising from the partnership.

Attributes of partnership are:

- Trust in partners
- Respect for partners
- Joint working
- Teamwork
- Eliminating boundaries
- Being an ally

Conceptual Framework: Collaboration has been defined as interactions between organisations [13]. [14] refine this description further noting how interactions vary in their scope and depth. The scope of interactions can vary from narrow to broad and this reflects the number of partners involved in the collaboration, the more partners the broader the interaction. The depth of interaction ranges from deep interactions whereby a large number of people from the collaborating organisations interact to shallow interactions which describe limited interactions. These limited interactions frequently only involve the managers of each organisation.

[15] note that to achieve collaborative success, communication is a key factor. However often there is lack of time for more informal communication and this limits the integration of staff working on a shared initiative [16]. Thus time needs to be set aside for informal networking before the collaboration starts in earnest [17].

The attributes of collaboration include that 'two or more individuals must be involved in a joint venture, typically one of an intellectual nature in which participants willingly participate in planning and decision making' [18]. It is further argued that individuals consider themselves to be members of a team working towards a common goal, sharing their expertise and responsibility for the outcome. Fundamentally, the relationship between collaborators is non-hierarchical and shared power is based on knowledge and expertise, rather than role or title [19].

The defining attributes of collaboration can therefore be summarized as follows:

- Intellectual and co-operative endeavor
- Knowledge and expertise more important than role or title
- Joint venture
- Teamworking
- Participation in planning and decision making
- Non-hierarchical relationship
- Sharing of expertise

- Willingness to work together towards an agreed purpose
- Trust and respect in collaborators
- Highly connected network
- Low expectation of reciprocation

The involvement of the public is central to working collaboratively [20]. The public gives the institutions support. This could be moral support, financial support, social support and good word of mouth.

One of the most widely recognised types of collaboration is partnerships [21]. Partnerships can be defined as a pooling or sharing of resources among two or more stakeholders to solve a problem or create an opportunity that neither can address individually [22]. In this way partnerships when operating effectively, can provide a synergy whereby the whole is greater than the sum of its parts [23]. [24] indicate that when this occurs each partner gains from the additional resources, sharing ideas, knowledge and finance that the other partners bring, which is argued add value for each participating member. It requires that all parties believe that through working together they can achieve something greater than if they work alone.

However it should be noted that the formation of public partnerships and inter-agency working have particular terms of reference in that partnerships are created from the outside, generally the product of central government initiatives and this in itself can create conflict [25].

Power relations play a key role in building partnerships for their needs to be a balance of power between organisations so that all are seen as having an important role [26]. However it is argued that partnerships are infrequently made of equals and the stronger party can prosper at the expense of the weaker partner. In public private partnerships (PPP) the role of each partner is based on public sector organisation acting as the purchaser, the client and the private sector partner adopting the role of the supplier [27]. Furthermore [28] state that the person who is “perceived” to hold the purse strings can be “perceived” to hold the power. Without a clear social anchor partnerships are more likely to be subject to the buffeting that any change in structure, policy and personnel may bring [29, 30]. Therefore there needs to be a shared need and will for the partnership to survive [31].

Characteristics of Collaboration

Isolation: Absence of joint activity with no communication at all between agencies.

Encounter: Some ad hoc inter-agency contact, but lowly connected networks, divergent organizational goals and perceived rivalry and stereotyping.

Communication: Joint working, but marginal to organizational goals. Frequent interactions and sharing of information as it applies to users whose needs cross boundaries, some joint training, a nominated person is responsible for liaison, expectation of reciprocation.

Collaboration: Joint working is central to mainstream activities. Trust and respect in partners means that they are willing to participate in formal, structured joint working including joint assessments, planning, service delivery and commissioning. There is a highly connected network and low expectation of reciprocation.

Integration: No longer see their separate identify as significant and may be willing to consider creation of unitary organisation [32].

Theoretical Framework: Systems Theory by Peter Senge:

Senge championed the systems framework. A systems framework refers to a set of interrelated and interdependent parts arranged in a manner that produces a unified whole [33]. It is a discipline for seeing the whole. Senge emphasizes system dynamics paradigm. In this concept he argues that things are interconnected in complex patterns that can be captured into a model without loss of relevance. Systemic thinking is the conceptual cornerstone of Peter Senge’s approach. Systems theory’s ability to comprehend and address the whole and examine the interrelationship between the parts provides for Peter Senge, both the incentive and the means to integrate the disciplines. Three things need noting here. First, systems theory looks to connections and to the whole. In this respect it allows people to look beyond the immediate context and to appreciate the impact of their actions upon others. To this extent it holds the possibility of achieving a more holistic understanding. Second, while the building blocks of systems theory are relatively simple, they can build into a rather more sophisticated model than are current in many organisations. Senge argues that one of the key problems with much that is written about and done in the name of management, is that rather simplistic frameworks are applied to what are complex systems. When we add these two points together it is possible to move beyond a focus on the parts, to begin to see the whole and to appreciate organisation as a dynamic process. Thus, the argument runs, a better appreciation of systems will lead to more

appropriate action. Third, system thinking, according to Senge, allows us to realize the significance of feedback mechanisms in organisations. Systems thinking is a framework for seeing interrelationships and repeated events rather than things. It is seeing patterns of change rather than static snapshots. It embodies the idea that the interrelationships among parts relative to a common purpose of a system are what is important. He concludes that the system's viewpoint is generally oriented towards the long-term view. That is why delays and feedback loops are so important. In the short term, you can often ignore them; they are inconsequential. They only come back to haunt you in the long run [34]. The systems theory considers many different perspectives such as quality assurance considerations. Quality factors such as reliability, availability, expandability, testability, among others, are considered. This framework was seen as a relevant aspect for coming up with collaborations and partnerships in ODL systems.

MATERIALS AND METHODS

This research was grounded in the qualitative paradigm. The use of a qualitative approach to research studies relies on the data production methods that are flexible and sensitive to the social context that such data is derived from, without losing any of the standardization or structure and on data analysis methods that presuppose the understanding of the complexity that is entailed onto the details [35].

Research Design: The research employed the descriptive survey design. It is argued in educational research that descriptive survey is a method of research that describes what we see over and beyond [36].

Thus the researchers chose this method as it allowed respondents to say exactly what they conceived of as the role of collaboration and partnerships in ODL programmes [37].

Sampling Procedure: Purposive sampling was employed to select information-rich cases to participate in the study. A purposive sample comprising of lecturers, stakeholders and students was made. [38] argues that "the logic and power of purposeful sampling lies in selecting information - rich cases for study in-depth". This study focused on respondents who had knowledge and lived experiences of higher education to include universities colleges and who were willing to take part in the investigation [39].

Instrumentation: The open-ended questionnaire and semi-structured interview were used as the main data gathering instruments.

Open-Ended Questionnaire: It is argued that questionnaires and surveys can be used to gather either quantitative or qualitative data [40].

Open ended questionnaires gave respondents an opportunity to elaborate on issues asked. Open-ended questions provide a response format that gives respondents the freedom to provide answers which they care to make. The researcher then has to make sense of all the responses given, construct appropriate categories and then code the categories so that the data can be analysed. Open-ended questions are the most important questions on the survey by offering important and unpredictable insights into human behaviour [41]. It is suggested that open-ended questions allow for more detailed expression of respondents' views [42]; [43] and that qualitative information on the respondents is far more helpful than aggregated statistical data.

Semi-Structured Interview: [44] say that the semi-structured interview has the advantage of being reasonably objective "while still permitting a more thorough understanding of the respondent's opinions and reasons behind them would be possible using the mailed questionnaire." They further argue that the semi-structured interview is generally most appropriate for interview studies in education. It provides a desirable combination of objectivity and depth and often permits gathering valuable data that could not be successfully obtained by any other approach [45].

[46] state that in the semi-structured interview the researcher introduces the topic and thereafter guides the discussion by asking specific questions. [47] say that although an interview guide is employed this type of interview gives the interviewer considerable latitude to pursue a range of topics and offer the subject a chance to shape the content of the interview.

Procedure: The questionnaires were distributed to the sampled lecturers at the beginning of weekend school tutorials and were collected at the end of the sessions. This was done in order to give respondents enough time to answer the questions in full. Permission to administer the questionnaire was sought from the responsible authorities.

Data Analysis: Data was analyzed using qualitative content analysis. To ensure accurate interpretations and analyses, the researchers examined responses from the open ended questionnaire to come up with the main themes. Overriding themes were generated. Content was analysed following the research questions.

RESULTS

Resource Mobilization: Respondents were of the view that collaborations and partnerships help in mobilization of resources in ODL institutions. The “win-win” potential of partnership draws extensively on efficiency arguments - maintaining that organisations working in partnership can access broader networks, combine complimentary resources and expertise and share good practice in order to accomplish specific tasks. These synergistic benefits constitute what [48] terms “collaborative advantage”, or what [49] call “partnership alchemy”, outcomes not possible if organisations work independently.

Capacity Building: ODL organisations look to business organisations to provide money, goods, services or expertise towards meeting organisation needs that might otherwise go unfunded. For all of the respondents in this study, a prime reason for working with business partners is to access resources. In addition to monetary resources, ODL organisations wish to tap into a range of business capabilities, including access to business networks, technology and expertise. This is evidenced by one respondent who had this to say:

It's the added value stuff we get, the leveraging we get rather than the monetary amount. It's their staff supporting us on an annual events, it's the fact that we get the support of their agencies, they can swing deals, so for a small organisation like us it's the contacts that they have that we can use and that's of value and that's what you get out of a partnership.

Relationship Building: Partnerships with several organisations might be interpreted as ways for institutions to build strategic relationships with key stakeholders such as government, customers and the public at large and position themselves as good service providers [50] of university education. Developing partnership relationships with other organisations is seen as one response to meet pressures from internal and external stakeholders.

Training and Development of Staff: Respondents felt that collaborations and partnerships help ODL institutions to train and develop staff in various fields. They had this to say:

The upcoming ODL institutions need basic training in Quality Assurance systems, course development, monitoring and evaluation, ODL pedagogy, module writing, administration of examinations and the like. Tutors and all the staff need this kind of training.

Opportunity to Engage in Attachments in Companies: It was noted in this research that collaborations and partnerships carry many benefits for ODL systems. In line with these findings, literature points to benefits as well. Benefits for collaborations include:

- Obtaining a competitive advantage;
- Building trust in communities;
- Managing external perceptions by enhancing public reputation;
- Increasing attractiveness to prospective employees; and
- Improving stakeholder relations [51, 52].

For most organisations, the need to access funds and technical resources can be a strong driver for engaging collaboratively with business organisations [53]. This is the case with ODL institutions which need to tap and practice ICT in companies.

Improvement of Educational Quality: On the issue of quality improvement, respondents had this to say:

This whole thing hinges on quality improvement. Benchmarks and standards are set and these meet international demands. In any case, institutions that put themselves in a glass ceiling and fail to collaborate limit their chances of accreditation on comparative basis.

Organisations may also view partnerships as ways to become more important institutional actors [54] or to influence social change [55]. Organisations need wide support to accomplish their advocacy goals and deliver quality services to clients. Partnering with various organisations has the potential for organisations to influence leaders' thinking on social issues, garner wide political support and obtain greater visibility for their programmes [56, 57].

Provision of Suitable Curricula: It is ideal that ODL institutions provide relevant curricula to students. Respondents highlighted that through collaborations and partnerships, a relevant curricula can be offered, that which meets international standards and make products marketable on the world market.

Meeting Various Stakeholder Demands: It was noted that collaborations help by ODL institutions to engage with stakeholders. An inclusive stakeholder approach to community involvement requires organisations to consider the interests of stakeholders and stakeholder engagement [58]. One way of understanding the motives driving partnership activities is to assess the attention ODL systems pay to particular stakeholders. In this study many references were made by respondents to partnership initiatives providing opportunities to address the needs of employees, customers, students and communities.

Reputation Building: Respondents were of the feeling that collaborations and partnerships help in reputation building. Enhancing reputation is a key motivation for forming partnerships, as one respondent explained:

I think reputation amongst our customers that's quite a large one. In particular, some ODL organisations have previously had quite a bad reputation and partnerships really work on bringing that up and that is one way that's helping that.

Building an image of a good corporate ODL institution with external constituencies, including government, customers and employees, can be one important reason why organisations engage with other local and international organisations [59, 60]. Partnerships are viewed as ways to enhance an organisation's credibility [61, 62].

CONCLUSIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

The major recommendations are that ODL institutions should collaborate and partner with various stakeholders like business people, companies, governments, alumni and other universities. This has great benefits in terms of reputation building of the institution, meeting the various stakeholder demands provision of suitable curricula, training and development of staff, resource mobilization, relationship building and quality improvement, among others.

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