

An Evaluation of Critical Success Factors in a Multinational Partnership

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Abstract

This paper discusses critical success factors in a partnership of education institutions from different countries, institutions, cultures and regulatory frameworks since 2007. The project was a partnership between Uganda, Ethiopia and Finland to develop leadership and management capacity in Ugandan Universities. An “appreciative inquiry approach” was adopted to evaluate the project using partnering institutions, project leaders, and partnership documents. The paper describes the approach to management of the project and discusses specific challenges and critical success factors that contributed to the project’s success. The evaluators’ major focus was on how partners gained consensus on key decisions. Practical examples and outputs from the project are highlighted to illustrate the project’s critical success factors. The discussion was guided by the Collaborative Leadership Theory advanced by David Chrislip and Carl Larson (1994) who proposed that a mutually beneficial relationship should work towards common goals by sharing responsibility, authority and accountability for achieving desired results, and that the collaboration does not only achieve “tangibles” but also intangibles such as the dignity that comes with the ability of individuals to start a new venture and see it to success. This evaluation found that the project’s success was attributed to partner institutions’ innovation, caution and collaboration with each assembling a competent team to detect and mitigate threats to their collaboration. The study concluded that the project’s critical success factors were; emotional intelligence of the project leaders and participants, involvement of key stakeholders, honesty and equal participation. For any partnership to succeed, leadership demands a structure that enables all levels within each institution to contribute to the partnership objectives, and respect each other, because each comes with peculiar expertise, skills and attributes. Inevitable shortcomings in every project notwithstanding, partners successfully navigated the different cultures, security issues, legal and political environment, economic factors and infrastructure limitations.

Key words: Collaborative Leadership, Multi-Institutional Collaboration, Partnership, Success Factors

Introduction

With a tenuous, global economy, quality concerns and a plethora of global complexities that outpace any empirical advancement, there is an essential demand for institutional collaborations to confront the grand challenges Higher Education Institutions (HEIs) are facing today (Brew, et al 2013). Funding aside, networking and benchmarking are compulsory in order for HEIs to strengthen quality in every endeavor of Higher Education (HE) activities in the known mandate of teaching, research and community work and the desired quality for the success of a collaboration. Higher education institutions need to embrace and recognize the great potential within a cooperation that yields tangible benefits and power in facilitating positive change to enable individual institutions to excel in their mandate (Tagg, 2012). Consequently,

the importance of collaborations is not contested. However, for a strong partnership, it is fundamental to develop friendship and trust first, as it is considered the most important thing in a lasting cooperation (Tierney et al, 2013).

Lau et al (2014), considers friendship and trust as the two most critical aspects that institutions need to succeed. Altbach and Knight (2007) augment that openness and honesty in a partnership are critical aspects in a trans-national collaboration with different structures, different cultures, different economic power, different levels of development and expertise. Regardless of such differences, the common goal should bring the actors to same level ground in order to neutralize such differences (Austin, 2000). He argues that commitment to the goal and respect for one another have a significant role in the success of a collaboration. Miller (2013), cautions actors in a partnership to be cognitive of the laws and regulations of academic programs at foreign universities which most time differ significantly, which actually has the potential to destroy the trust if such issues do not come out early enough in the initiative. Yet, such information was often concealed if it had the potential to jeopardize the initiative (Barifaijo and Namara (2013), yet such dishonesty was found to be dangerous not only for a successful and survival of the partnership but also it can be the source of dysfunctional conflicts (Barifaijo and Namara, 2013).

Background

The University of Tampere in Finland, Uganda Management Institute and Makerere University Kampala began an initiative to address leadership challenges in Higher Education Institutions in 2007. In an informal discussion, two university professors of University of Tampere and Makerere University discussed the emerging challenges for higher education in Africa. Specific attention closed in on Uganda, with persistent students and staff unrests, degenerating mandates, lost endeavors, continuous blame games on the issue of quality, and institutional competition rather than cooperation. The initiative turned into reality in 2011, leading to two countries (Finland and Uganda), and two Ugandan Higher Education Institutions (HEIs); Makerere University and Uganda Management Institute (UMI) establishing a cooperation and entering into a formal partnership in 2011. Although the first intervention was to build Leadership and Management capacity of University Leaders in Uganda, it was deemed necessary to develop capacity among the trainers through a “Training of Trainers” course that lasted nine (9) months – from March, 2011 to January, 2012. Participants in the collaboration included faculty from Makerere University and Uganda Management Institute, and staff from the Ministry of Education. The training was facilitated by professors from the Universities of Tampere and Helsinki in Finland.

The nine (9) months Training of Trainers Course, culminated into a Postgraduate Diploma in Higher Education Leadership and Management housed at Uganda Management Institute. From 2012 to 2013, a Master’s Program in Higher Education Leadership and Management by the same group, and housed at Makerere University. In 2014, the University of Kwazulu Natal had its PhD in Higher Education Leadership and Management developed, and doctoral students from partner institutions took the advantage to participate in the training. From 2014

to-date, staff and students from the three (3) African HEIs; Makerere University, Uganda Management Institute and Kwazulu Natal have benefited from the exchange programs in the partnership.

The past two decades have seen an explosion of interest in funding education and research partnerships, often between HEIs in high-income and low- and middle-income (North to South) countries, between high income countries (North to North) and sometimes between low and middle income countries (South to South) with some collaborations miraculously succeeding and others conspicuously failing. The actors have limited information about the factors leading to the success or failure of the partnerships (Cummings et al 2009). In fact, according to de-Graft-Atkins et al (2012), for HEIs to thrive in the 21st century they require interdisciplinary work, partnership and global cooperation (Altbach, 2005). Similarly, Brew (2013) found that collaborations are at the core of HE activities and provide the platform to engage in ambitious projects. Nonetheless, globally, Africa in general and Uganda in particular, most collaborations do not survive to see their second anniversary (Barifaijo and Karyeija, 2016). Whether such failures are masterminded or otherwise, the consequences are undesirable and detrimental not only for individual departments but for institutions as well as the host countries. With the success of the Makerere University, University of Tampere partnership, Universities in Ethiopia were attracted and have been brought on board.

Purpose

This inquiry aimed at documenting success factors that have sustained a multi-institutional collaboration for other institutions and countries to pick lessons for management of their own partnerships. Specifically, this investigation aimed at; 1) establishing how participation contributes successful partnership and 2) assessing the role of project leaders in sustaining partnership.

Theoretical Orientation

There are many theories that perhaps scholars would adopt to explain success factors in a collaboration. Cogently, the theory of Collaborative Leadership was adopted to explain success factors in a partnership. A Collaborative Leadership Theory was developed by Chrislip and Larson (1994) through their research on civic leadership and collaboration in the 1980s and early '90s. The theory assumes that by cooperating and coordinating efforts, actors should transcend personal interests to pursue common goals for a collaboration to succeed. They argue that in a leadership context, collaborations should emphasize shared vision and joint strategies to address public concerns that go beyond the purview of any particular party or even an individual. Hence, they proposed that a mutually beneficial relationship should work towards common goals by sharing responsibility, authority and accountability for achieving desired results (Randall, 2012). The theory avers that for any partnership to succeed, leadership should create a structure that enables all levels within each institution to contribute to the goals of the relationship and must respect one another and agree on the best skills, peculiar expertise, unique attributes and distinctive abilities, competencies as well as passion (Schneier, 2016).

The theory further proposes that to succeed, the collaboration does not just achieve “tangibles” but also the intangibles such as the dignity that comes with the ability of individuals to start a new venture and see it to success.

For Chrislip and Larson (1994), a successful collaboration should be; broadly inclusive of all stakeholders, provide credible and open collaborative processes that assure participants of audience, visible and with high-level support, led by well-known and credible leaders in the community (MacKenzie and Meyers, 2012). Project leaders play an important role in sustaining a collaboration considering that they negotiate and agree on the partnership details including working and communicating with all stakeholders.

Literature Review

The world has evolved to become a prolific pitch rife with collaborative ideas and practices opportunistically aimed at improving circumstances for humanity while systematically defying physical borders (Echavarria, 2015). Collaboration between institutions across countries has steadily improved over the past two decades with mobility of information, ideas, and people across the globe (De Man and Ard-Pieter, 2013). There is vast literature on what actually can sustain a partnership. Different scholars, perhaps using their experience have advanced success factors as; strategic leadership, long term goals, clear goals, concrete purpose, participation, respect for institutional frameworks, mutual respect, understanding and trust, ownership and co-existence, homogeneous disciplines and a conducive work environment (de-Graft Aikins et al 2012; Echavarria, 2015; Hanson, 2015; Tierney, 2013). Nonetheless, literature and theories discussed in this section entail previous findings and debates on knowledge and beliefs around role of participation and leadership in sustainability of partnerships.

Colleges and universities collaborate on initiatives that individual institutions might not be able to accomplish alone, including infrastructure projects, course offerings and new educational models (McBride, 2010). In many cases, collaboration results in the creation of a formal entity with its own staff, budget, and governance. Colleges and universities can use the collaboration to grow their influence with commercial providers and, in this way, benefit the development of learning ecosystems (Lau et al 2014). Collaboration is a synchronized and coordinated activity in which the participants continuously try to develop and sustain the solution of the problem shared between them. Collaboration is a collective activity that works like the parts of an old machine which priorities to work in the group instead of individually (Hanson, 2015). They also encourage other participants to be united and use a common identity to achieve the goal shared with them.’ Collaboration, if done with good intention, can help in building pyramids of authority and power because it is collective activity. As you go up with a collective activity you will be able to shape your own identity and will be able to direct the efforts of the group in your own interests (Egron-Polak and Hudsun, 2014).

Although the discussion adopted the term ‘partnership’, there are other terms used synonymously in this paper. In no specific order, the terms include; cooperation, collaboration, partnership, alliances, networks, linkages, initiatives, agreements. According to Elsemary (2012), a cooperation is accomplished by the division of labor among participants as each member is assigned to address a portion of the problem. Cooperation between educational

institutions therefore is aimed at encouraging educators to share their professional expertise, insights and knowledge, as the basis of mutual learning and development (Daim, Tet al 2012). On the other hand, internal networking within an institution can be essential to staff's career advancement. When professionals reach out to colleagues in different offices they have the opportunity to collaborate on new programs and initiatives, discover new areas of interest, learn more about office procedures and cultures and create new relationships with potential mentors (Austin, 2000). By networking, individuals or institutions meet, interact or enter into relationships that culminate into cooperation (Archer and Cameron, 2008).

Similarly, linkages exist when connections develop between two or more groups so that changes in one group influence changes in the others (Altbach, 2005). Correspondingly, joint ventures clearly state limits on their purposes. The common purpose of entering a joint venture is to make a product that neither partner can afford to make on her own, such as developing new software or a project where information cannot be monopolized by an individual partner (Almansour and Kempner, 2015). Hence, in a joint venture; partners share profits, expenses and all business information without giving up their independent status (Brew, 2013; De Man and Ard-Pieter 2013). Because of its voluntary nature, the success of a collaboration is dependent upon one or more collaborative leader's ability to maintain these relationships. Therefore, partnerships are voluntary collaborative relationships among various parties that agree to work together to achieve a common purpose or undertake specific tasks and share risks, responsibilities and benefits (Barifaijo and Namara; Brew, 2013).

Although expertise, trust and honesty were found to be key in a successful partnership, Farquhar and Fitzsimons (2011) found "negotiation skills" to be critical especially at the initial stages of the collaboration. Partners with a critical eye that analyze and interpret the documentation were more likely to sustain a partnership than those who had premeditated motives, sometimes for personal benefits (Alejandro et al 2008).

Lau et al (2014) found that negotiation skills were vital at the initiation stages but leader expertise and emotional intelligence were extremely important for sustaining collaborations considering that having a champion or professional on the project was best for successful collaboration. Relatedly, MacKenzie and Meyers (2012) found that possession of professional expertise is critical in achieving the project's goals and increasing trust among stakeholders. Hank (2009) found generic competencies such as emotional intelligence, communication skills and interpersonal skills beneficial to institutions and sectors alike. He argues that with good interpersonal relationship, specific expertise is imparted to the rest of team members such that even when the project leader leaves the institution, the trained team is in position to help the replacement to curtail inherited projects from drifting. Otherwise, team members might reduce their engagement, and continuity will be threatened which is essentially, the worst of all possible results (Schneider, 2016).

In order to avert drifting of collaborative relationship or partnership, Almansour and Kempner (2015), recommend feasibility assessment to ascertain the necessity of the collaboration and whether the conditions for success can be created. Additionally, sustainability strategies must be established and strategies laid for transition in case funding ends. Barifaijo

and Namara (2015) found that higher education institutions glorify international collaborations because of their ability to leverage a competitive edge although Raue and Wieland (2015) observe that pursuit of personal gains and selfish reasons account for flopping of most collaborations, hardly before their first anniversary. Lunnan, et al (2008) explain that some joint ventures fail due to lack of focus and overlapping motivation among the participants and their assertion is supported by Lowndes and Skelcher (1998). Consequently, MacKenzie and Meyers (2012) caution institutions to always let the idea incubate in order to benefit from such collaborations, taking into consideration issues of quality and interest. Consequently, since some institutions may not mind about quality, Kraus and Sultana (2008) recommend close scrutiny regarding the quality and intended product of the collaboration for future benefits, sustainability and competitive advantage. Hence, quality will determine stakeholders' trust.

Methodology

Ethnographic data, grounded in qualitative approach and encouraged by Krueger and Casey (2009) was adopted, especially in trying to illustrate successful stories, both past and ongoing. Although literature played a bigger part in informing the discussion, the on-going collaboration was compared with projects in Ugandan higher education institutions. Project documents, Memorandum of Understanding (MoU) guiding policies and corresponding documents were reviewed. Closed, failed and on-going collaborations were of great interest to the ethnographers. Ethnographic data was collected by documenting details of communication and reactions during meetings. The duration, participants' emotions, arguments, location among others, were manually recorded in notebooks and digitally using recorders and cameras. Unstructured interviews were conducted with Makerere University and Uganda Management Institute staff. Krueger and Casey (2009) recommend an institutional ethnographic inquiry specially to solicit participants' personal experiences. Staff and students who benefitted from the mobility programs were invited to share their experience. This paper discusses a number of strategies developed as well as lessons learnt in the twelve-year duration of the multinational partnership between Makerere University, University of Tampere and Uganda Management Institute (April, 2007 – to-date).

Findings and Discussion

Participation in a partnership is core. Therefore, successful partnerships have largely depended on how institutions have involved other stakeholders in the project. Most projects have brought the rest of the members especially those with expertise on board, for buy in and ownership. Although there are diverse types of partnerships, there are two major ones in which higher education institutions fall: Cross-sector partnerships (between nonprofits and the business, government, and/or academic sectors) and partnerships between donor organizations and recipients (Madigan and Schroth-Cavatalo, 2011). Although cross-sector partnerships are fairly simple to initiate, they are challenging to maintain. The biggest challenge however is that regardless of the goodwill of the participants, two varying cultures must come together to produce results. This demands commitment and efforts to establish a common ground and use shared goals that underscore the vision of the partners (Linden, 2002).

Although most collaborations are established to benefit institutions and people found there, majority of staff did not have sufficient grasp of cooperation in the institutions. This divergent finding was defended by Vazquez-Brust (2014) who asserts that only the concerned departments and sometimes individuals understand such ventures even when it leads to long-term benefits and sustainability for all members of the participating institution. In fact, scholars have explained that institutions manage the complexity of partnership by adopting a long-term, flexible approach, given that partnerships evolve and institutions learn effective management, build capacity and gain valuable experiences (e.g. Kraus and Sultana, 2008; Lau, 2014 and Armitage, 2007). Therefore, a partnership can serve as a learning mechanism that teaches you to be better at what you do and enables you to achieve your institutional goals. Given such benefits therefore, participation of every member was critical to enable everyone become familiar with what the partnership entailed and how members in the partnership behaved.

There were camps in these institutions, and each camp had its own arrangements, perhaps only known to them. The personalized projects included research projects, joint ventures, joint degrees, mobility programs, and they seem to be only for a few individuals in the department. This kind of segregation was found by Gillett, et al (2016) to breed excessive competition and sometimes sabotage. Lunnan and Haugland (2008) found that this omission often happens at formation stages when the input of other members is not considered, yet it proceeds through partnership development processes up to implementation. Although partnerships have to be developed and nurtured in ways that respect and recognize all individuals, most institutions did not allow everyone to participate, often with a misconception that they had no useful contribution to make for the partnership. According to Armitage (2007), partnership is not just the responsibility of institutional leaders but of everyone in the institution. Ground rules for the partnership are important at the initial stages yet very few leaders perform this fundamental requirement necessary for valuing and respecting the individual partners. Whereas it may seem that all is well for those enjoying the partnership, individuals left out of such ventures were potentially chaotic as they had nothing to lose (Hank, 2009).

According to Echavarria (2015), the best thing a collaborative leader can do is to lead by example, walk the talk and be seen to model the right behaviors. Hence, leaders must show a willingness to take risks, continually question their own ideas, and reward others for their clear communication and valuable insights. In fact Austin (2000), argues that if leaders are not alert, some minute aspects in the collaboration could affect the long-term success of the partnership leading to inability to analyze the depth of the alliance, lack of shared aspirations and strategies, lack of unified governance, and the failure to deploy shared talent. Consequently, a partnership that fails to offer a clue to a successful arrangement will not succeed (Riviello, 2010). It can even be more fruitful if the leader shared mandate and strategy aimed squarely at addressing the joint issues faced by the partnering institutions or departments through a model that shares talent. Hence, the partnership can be unique for at least four reasons; a unique focus on industry challenges, a highly multidisciplinary problem set, its physical scale and its focus on postgraduate training and mobility (Mirvis, 2013).

Emotional intelligence of leaders, was found to lead to successful collaborations especially if the goal was to create high impact global visibility instead of focusing on individual institutions and benefits. It actually becomes more useful if the aim is to tackle

complex issues of major importance to the two nations where the partnership of the two universities' capabilities is greater than the individual parts. Specifically, such collaborations should physically combine the best scholars from both institutions and actively engage them in particular areas of their expertise. Unlike most traditional international collaborative models, a partnership should have a large-scale joint physical presence that primarily focuses on capacity development in areas such as PhD training and collaborative research (Cloet, 2016). Hence, effective leadership is setting up successful international collaborations to level the field, especially with partners in developing countries (Jacobson, 2001).

Researchers found some key lessons for collaborative leaders with six distinguishing characteristics that include; balanced motivations, transferable skills, contextual intelligence, integrated networks, prepared mind, intellectual thread (Egron-Polak and Hudsun, 2014; Hanson, 2015 and McBride, 2010). Nonetheless, although Tierney, et al (2013) finds these characteristics to be exciting, they are not a given attribute and it may be extremely difficult to find all of them in a single leader. By way of being realistic, Carter (2013), provides five qualities of what a collaborative leader should possess which include; willingness to take risks, eager to listen, passion for the cause, optimistic about the future, able to share knowledge, power and credit. Although such attributes may be realistic and sometimes easy to measure, they may not all be found in one person.

Similarly, Almansour and Kempner (2015), listed ten key lessons for a successful collaborative leader as; personal motive for collaborating; strategies for simplifying complex situations, anticipating conflicts and addressing them, recognizing that some people are quite too difficult to partner with, courage to act for the long term, managing tension between the means and the end, investing in strong personal relationships at all levels, injecting energy, passion and drive into leadership style, developing the confidence to share the credit generously and developing one's interpersonal skills in particular.

By contrast, collaboration requires managers to achieve success through people and resources outside their control and for this they have had no preparation. In fact, Armitage et al (2007), provides four major leadership traits all highly collaborative leaders should possess. These include; authentic leadership by placing the goals of the institution ahead of their own self-interest and following through commitments, relentless pursuit of transparent decision making, view of resources as instruments of action, realizing shared goals through the flexible use of shared resources, clarifying the relationship between decisions, rights, accountability and rewards, taking time to establish decision paths and a common vocabulary that everyone can comprehend for successful collaborations. Although language barrier, financial stability, good will of governments, faculty resistance and attitude were key precursors, all the potential barriers were minimized at the initial stages in the on-going collaboration.

In order to gain state support, all the activities in the collaboration included government officials from the Ministry of Education and Sports and the Institutions' top authority for equal involvement in deciding the areas of the collaboration and sensitization of those participating in the collaboration. At the initial stage, the key partners synthesized and sought clarity of agreement documents and interpretation of each other's guidelines; especially financial. Common grounds and language were established at the initial stages. Such clarity eased

communication within the team (intergroup and intra-group). Further, all members were encouraged to participate in proportional magnitudes. Clear structures, leadership roles and strategy for continuity were established. After the closure of the initial projects, interaction continued with other project activities, such as mobility of staff and students. All members were carried through the etiquette of international collaborations for them to learn to appreciate and develop intellectual humility and purposeful communication.

Conclusion

Collaborations always start off in a woolly way with failure making one feel unable to get up and very circumspect in newer cooperations. The key is not to break up collaborations but to allow more time and money for management. It is another opportunity to spell out who's going to do what and how it will be done. The overhead of setting up a productive relationship is very high.

Therefore, goals are essential to success but should take cognizance of likelihood of individual goals not aligning with the goals of the collaboration and this calls for recognition and working upon the factors that link the structural factors, economic status and the cultural environment. These are closely linked and difficult to present independently.

Although this multinational collaboration endeavored to mitigate anticipated challenges by involving everybody, there are always individuals who claim to know it all and never appreciate anything, anybody, any effort, others' culture, method of work and philosophies and are suspicious of everyone. These can be minimized with good leadership and strict implementation of sanctions in Memorandums of Understanding.

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