

THE ROLE OF INSTITUTIONAL PARTNERSHIPS IN THE SUSTAINABLE DEVELOPMENT OF THE NIGERIAN EDUCATION SYSTEM

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ABSTRACT: *The sustainable development of the Nigerian education system is critical to the well-being of the country. This is because education plays a key role in manpower development, infrastructure and the productive prowess of any nation. In this paper, focus is placed on the role of institutional partnerships in advancing sustainable development in the Nigerian education system. As a theoretical paper, a shift is offered, in the perspective of partnership. This is as institutional partnerships are presented from the lens of social reinforcement, and the capacity of such collaborative frameworks and exchanges between institutions, to provide support, but most importantly, motivate through validation and the transfer of ideologies; especially such that reflect concerns of sustainability in the education system. Drawing on the position emphasized through literature, it was concluded that by engaging in institutional partnerships, tertiary institutions are offered the required levels of drive, recognition and support critical for addressing their sustainability goals.*

Keywords: *Sustainability development, Nigerian education system, social reinforcement, organizational learning.*

INTRODUCTION

Sustainability builds on the acknowledgement of responsibility toward the future, through the management and modulation of resources and actions in ways that promote the economic, social and environmental well-being of related institutions (Sund & Ohman, 2011). The strive for sustainability, as Jickling and Wals (2008) pointed out, is one which is hinged on an awareness of one's social context, and the implications of actions on stakeholders in the short and long-run. Ejikeme (2014) stated that sustainable values are transferable and can be reinforced through policies and regulatory measures. However, apart from the use of policies and other institutionalized frameworks, which reflect self-reinforcement mechanisms, social reinforcement mechanisms also aid in advancing sustainable development – such as external validation, network embeddedness and partnerships (Argote et al, 2000; Schimel et al, 2001).

Institutional partnerships, while serving as social reinforcement mechanisms, also create the opportunity for learning, information sharing and the development of knowledge (Casady et al, 2018). This reiterates Yang et al (2013) view of partnerships as being ideal for open innovation and the development of relational capabilities for organizations. Within the education system, prior studies on institutional partnerships, even within the education system, have centred primarily on related benefits in terms of relational rent, strategic positioning resulting from alliances, and improved effectiveness (Parkinson & Welsh, 2009; Stephens & Boldt, 2004). This paper goes further by advancing a position on the significance of institutional partnership as a social reinforcement mechanism, and the contributions of such toward the sustainable development of the Nigerian Education System. The study objectives are as such designed to address related social reinforcement concerns such as social validation, value reinforcement, and operational support.

Social Validation

Institutional partnerships entail collaborations between two or more institutions, in ways that facilitate the exchange of ideas, technology and resources and the structuring of a cohesive

leadership and approach toward the attainment of goals (Forrer et al, 2010). Partnership goals may be economic or non-economic, nonetheless, it usually entails the alignment of structures and values so as to be able to entertain possible differences (Johnson & Wilson, 2009). One aspect scarcely addressed in research is that of social validation, which denotes the institution's "acceptance" or "approval" by significant others who share the institution's context. As an intangible factor, most institutions overlook the benefits and advantages of social validation (Wittenbaum & Bowman, 2004). According to Wittenbaum and Bowman (2004), validation enhances the institution's reputation within its context, increasing its trustworthiness and recognition by other organizations. Ogunode (2020) identified validation as one of the setbacks of tertiary institutions in Nigeria. Ogunode (2020) observed that the state of declining collaborations between tertiary institutions and other institutions (local and international), has dampened the climate of innovation in the education sector. Report (Times Higher Education, 2023), shows that the University of Ibadan, which is currently ranked as the number one in Nigeria, does not even make the top 1000 world list. Okoroma (2016) pointed out that while the challenge of quality education may appear to emerge from the lack of infrastructure and development, such gaps can be tackled through learning, and strategic partnerships; Both of which enhance the institution's disposition toward the environment and also result in social validation from stakeholders and other organizations. This is because partnerships and strategic networking, even within the context of the education sector, increase the visibility of the institution and demonstrate its commitment to development, thus enhancing the tendency for its acceptance and approval by significant constituents within its wider community and context (Okoroma, 2016; Udida et al, 2009).

Partnerships enable the institution's extension into other frontiers and contexts; building on the network, visibility and validation of their partners, thus enabling them increased visibility, recognition and also validation (Casady, 2020; El Hadidi & Kirby, 2017). One could also argue that social validation serves as a reinforcement when it comes to sustainable development in the educational system, especially since it encourages and constantly spurs institutions in the direction of innovation and change readiness. Institutional partnerships, thus create the enabling platform for learning and development, and at the same time, serve to reinforce such outcomes through their relationship and continued support for the target institutions' adoption of innovative processes and actions (Alves et al, 2010).

Eddy (2010) noted that low-performing institutions are able to enter or engage with more innovative or high-performing institutions in partnerships such as through joint research, academic exchange programs and even joint degrees, all of which would significantly impact the curriculum development of the institution; enriching the quality of its learning outcomes. Such changes, when manifested in the institution's behaviour and standards, improve its standing with other organizations or institutions, and leads to further processes of validation and support from various groups interested in the sustainable development of the institution (Eddy, 2010; Dao et al, 2020).

Value Reinforcement

The term "value" is relative, and could also be considered as bi-conceptual in nature. First, it points to the ideologies which the individual or institution holds dear or emphasizes as its underlying drive. That is the underlying principles and standards the institution holds dear (Tanakorn & Pacapol, 2011). On the other hand, it also indicates the offerings and actual worth of a product or service advanced by the institution, which yet is highly subjective in terms of perceptions or significance to the parties involved (Lam et al, 2004; Joshi & Sharma, 2004). Both interpretations apply within this context, especially since institutional partnerships can be useful in reinforcing the principles and standards of sustainability, while at the same time, increasing the worth, relevance or value of the institution to its context.

Value reinforcement as a social reinforcement mechanism of institutional partnership, which refers to the emphasis on particular ideologies (for example sustainability), standards, practices or curricula such as expressed in tertiary institutions, advanced through exchanges and interactions

with partners who share and advocate for such (Okoroma, 2016; Ahaotu & Ogunode, 2021). Thus, in this sense, not only are such standards and principles strongly encouraged and supported, but institutional outcomes and behaviour are such that are expected to strengthen their worth as well, with their offerings effectively addressing the ills and challenges associated with poor sustainability actions or operations within its environment. Argote et al (2000) stated that, most often, in the process of partnering, not only is knowledge or information exchanged, but ideologies and leadership philosophies are also adopted, especially by younger or less developed partners. This is also a demonstration of learning.

Such learning or imitation of behaviour through observations is captured in Bandura's (cited in Argote et al, 2000) social cognitive theory. Bandura (cited in Argote et al, 2000) identified the impact of learning and experiences on the behaviour of the individual or institution, referring to changes in institutional forms or practices as personality adaptations, designed to enable it to cope more effectively with the emerging threats, opportunities or expectations within its environment (Ouchi, 2004). The adoption of partnering institutions' ideologies and philosophies, clearly demonstrates this position as institutions, from a rational point of view, would be expected to copy, imitate, enact and institutionalize values and ideologies that best contribute toward increasing their innovativeness and the achievement of their goals (Argote et al, 2000; Chou & Pramudawardhani, 2015).

Operational Support

Operational support in partnership describes the extent to which institutions are offered relative support by their partners. This, within the context of the education sector, can be availed through access to partner institution's library, in-licensing of intellectual property, the use of experienced or skilled staff from partnering institutions and other related support actions (Jones, 2001; Eddy, 2010). Olowu (2001) described operational support as one of the fundamental factors and basis for partnerships; noting that through partnerships, organizations are able to leverage the capacities and facilities of their partners. This borders on the outcome of relational capabilities where institutions are able to develop dynamic abilities or capacities drawing on their access to the resources of their partnering institutions.

Studies (Eddy, 2010; El Hadidi & Kirby, 2017) indicate that support from partners allows for a more dynamic and flexible disposition toward the environment. This is because the availability of partners' resources increases the alternatives availed to institutions. This corroborates Udida et al (2009) assertion that one of the ways institutions in academia can grow is to build on the resources of other more dominant institutions such as through access to libraries and also through invitations to international scholars as visitors to the institution, that way enriching curricular and learning outcomes. These actions and level of exchange, strengthen the linkage between institutions, increasing the innovation capacity of institutions and their effectiveness (Eddy, 2010; Sawyer, 2004). Research (Eddy, 2010; Ogunode, 2020; Sawyer, 2004) shows that when it comes to the Nigerian education sector, particularly tertiary institutions, more is expected in line with institutional partnerships, especially in the area of library synchronization and knowledge exchange. Library synchronization refers to the extent to which multiple libraries are consistently updated owing to particular additions (in terms of data, books or other materials) in any single one (Sawyer, 2004; Eddy, 2010). For example, where there is a synchronization of the libraries of two institutions A and B; relative changes in the library systems of A, are instantly reflected in those of B; thus, suggesting that institutions are constantly abreast of information and knowledge development within their contexts.

Partnerships and Sustainable Development

Current research is increasingly geared toward a focus on sustainability within the global education industry. However, concerns yet remain even at the local level, especially within global south countries such as Nigeria (Ogunode, 2020). Ejikeme (2014) described sustainability in education as encompassing administrative practices, processes, operations and also curricula and learning

outcomes. Ejikeme (2014) asserted that in discussing sustainability from an education perspective, there is a necessary extension in focus covering the implications of institutions' operations on the environment to other areas such as their contribution to knowledge development and learning outcomes with regard to the significance of social and environmental actions as well as economic choices.

Institutional partnerships according to Eddy (2010) bridge institutional inadequacies, through access to resources and support; however, as fundamentally advanced in this paper, partnerships provide social reinforcements which can be useful to institutions' sustainability development goals. These include social validations based on increased recognition and acceptance within various networks and by different groups, value reinforcement through adopted or reinforced values, particularly with regard to sustainability standards and practices, and also operational support such as access to resources.

Social validation is useful in motivating and spurring actions that are considered necessary and acceptable within the wider community (Schimel et al, 2001). This sort of reinforcement demonstrates social support and recognition of the institution within a wider context and enhances the context and constituents of potential partners that are willing and ready to also collaborate with the institution. Such outcomes are not only reassuring but also serve to reinforce the institution's disposition and commitment toward sustainable development. Similarly, institutional partnerships are such that allow for the exchange of philosophies and ideas, between partnering institutions or organizations in such a way that can stir concerns or interests in sustainability, or also reinforce existing sustainability goals (Yang et al, 2013).

Schimel et al (2001) argued that the ideologies and values for organizational change, easily transverse layers of doubt and concern when institutions experience or observe their effectiveness in other institutions, similar in nature to them, or such that share their environment. This follows the popular adage that "seeing is believing" and as such, the institution's process of learning through observation. Institutional partnerships are therefore such that create the atmosphere of learning through observation and experience, emboldening the institution's resolve based on its own direct observation and learning and that way reinforcing its commitment and values. Likewise, partnerships, according to Dao et al (2020) are significant in enhancing the institution's access to resources and the necessary collaborative frameworks that increase its options and capabilities – all in line with advancing its sustainability concerns.

CONCLUSION

The collaborative exchange and partnership between institutions is in this paper, identified as substantial in developing the sustainability of tertiary institutions, particularly within global south countries such as Nigeria. The views emphasized in this paper are such that identify institutional partnership as advancing social reinforcement to institutions' actions, value and capacity toward sustainability. This way, institutional partnerships are identified as significant to the change orientation as well as favourable dispositions of institutions toward sustainability practices and values, based on the noted validation, reinforcement and support offered by such. It is in this vein affirmed that the collaborative frameworks and exchanges necessitated through institutional partnerships offer much more than resources and learning opportunities. Such create conditions that motivate and reinforce the value for and commitment to sustainable development through external validation and the alignment of ideologies or philosophies.

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