

# Critical Success Factors for Effective Institutional Collaboration

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## Abstract

Collaboration is almost a buzzword in Higher Education institutions. Many Memoranda of Understanding (MOU's) and Memoranda Of Agreement (MOA's) have been signed between Higher Education institutions and other organisations in industry and among Higher Education institutions. The tangible and intangible benefits arising from these collaborations have not been as expected for many institutions. This study identifies the critical success factors for effective institutional collaboration. The study utilizes the qualitative research paradigm using the case study research design. The study surveyed four Higher Education institutions in Zimbabwe, which are Midlands State University (MSU), National University of Science and Technology (NUST), Harare Institute of Technology (HIT) and the Zimbabwe Open University (ZOU). Data were generated through document survey, direct and participant observation. Some of the key success factors in collaboration revealed in the study include skills in human relations and mediation, individual commitment, trust and commitment by all parties, System openness and transparency, reciprocity between parties and enabling organisational structures. The research concludes that collaboration by the institution has been well conceived but the tangible benefits have not been fully realised because of a lack of enduring commitment at all levels. The study recommends the establishment of concurrent monitoring and evaluation procedures and channels to correct problems, the cascading of agreements to departmental level and establishment of mechanisms for cooperation of departments between the subject institutions.

Keywords: Collaboration; Success factors; Education institutions; Qualitative research

## 1. Introduction

Higher education institutions in Zimbabwe have signed several MOU's and MOA's among themselves, with other organisations in local industry and with international organisations. There is, therefore, a tremendous willingness within the higher education sector to forge long term mutually beneficial strategic alliances because of the potential benefits that arise with successful collaboration.

Though many higher education institutions have entered into these collaborative partnerships locally and internationally, there has not been significant sustained benefits realized from the strategic partnerships. Some of the agreements are never fully implemented and some are abandoned before completion of the intended results.

There has been broad research on collaboration in higher education institutions with most of the literature focusing on the drivers of collaboration and the benefits. A smaller component of collaboration research has sought to clarify the key success factors in research hence the lack of understanding in collaboration strategy.

Mayfield and Lucas (2000) suggested more broad general ideas on successful collaboration. They argued that successful collaborations typically require support from political leaders, opinion-makers and others who

control valuable resources and thus give legitimacy to the collaborative initiative. Other factors that influence successful performance relate to the collaborative process. Tapper, Kleinman and Nakashian, (1997) and Gray (1996) argued that members must develop clear roles and policy guidelines and provide a structure for the collaborative process. Reilly and Peterson (1997) suggested sharing of ownership and responsibility as key to successful collaboration. Though research has been carried out, there is still a significant information gap on key success factors in Higher education collaboration.

In addition to the general limited research on collaboration in higher education collaboration, much of the studies were carried out in the United States and Europe. Questions still arise, therefore, as to whether the same factors apply to the Zimbabwean setting. These questions provide the impetus for this research.

## **2. Statement of the Problem**

Higher Education institutions in Zimbabwe have entered into several collaborative relationships locally and abroad. There is, however, very little to show with these institutions in terms of real benefits arising from such collaboration. It is not clear whether higher education institutions understand and appreciate the factors that are crucial for successful institutional collaboration. The study, therefore, identifies the key success factors for effective institutional collaboration.

## **3.Aims & Objectives of the Study**

The study sought to identify key success factors for collaboration among higher education institutions in Zimbabwe.

The study aimed at:

- identifying the key success factors for effective institutional collaboration.
- identifying barriers to effective institutional collaboration.
- recommending strategies to enhance institutional collaboration

## **4. Research Questions**

The following sub-problems stood as research questions:

- What are the key success factors for effective institutional collaboration?
- What are the barriers to effective institutional collaboration in the H.E sector?
- What strategies could H.E institutions employ to enhance the effectiveness of collaboration?

## **5.Justification**

Institutional collaboration has not been as effective in the Zimbabwean H.E sector because of lack of a clear strategy and knowledge of key success factors by H.E institutions. Higher education institutions thus have committed time and resources to relationships that have not yielded the expected benefits.

It is hoped that this study will clarify key issues that enable effective collaboration for higher education institutions worldwide. The study closes the knowledge gap on institutional collaboration particularly in Zimbabwe. It considers the unique variables in Zimbabwean higher education institutions.

## **6.Review of Related Literature**

Mattessich, Murray-Close and Monsey (2001) define collaboration as a mutually beneficial and well-defined relationship entered into by two or more organizations to achieve common goals.

Most research on collaboration of universities and industry have been carried out in Europe and the United States of America by individuals such as Powel (1996), Siegel, Waldman and Atwater (2003), Henderson and Jaffe (1998). The Euro-centric and American effectively creates a knowledge gap and questions of relevance for African institutions.

The research literature on collaboration success factors seems to indicate that there is no single success factor responsible for creating successful inter-institutional collaborations and that institutions need to align several factors to some degree to ensure effective collaboration (Mattessich and Monsey, 1992). Success in collaboration depends on industry, societies and the needs of the different parties and partners to the agreements. There is, therefore, need for the development of literature and knowledge which is specific to Higher Education collaboration in Zimbabwe which suit the conditions, variables and needs of the institutions in the country.

## **7. Methodology**

This study falls within the qualitative research paradigm and employs the multiple case study design involving four institutions of higher learning in Zimbabwe, which are MSU, NUST, HIT and ZOU. The underlying philosophy to this study is the interpretivist philosophy. However, in some instances, data were presented quantitatively in tables and percentages were adopted to show intensity of an occurrence or lack of it. Data generation was through interviews, document survey, direct and participant observation.

## **8. Findings**

### **8.1. Major reasons why Higher Education institutions seek collaboration**

#### **8.1.1. Pooling and sharing resources**

The study revealed that higher education institutions are constrained from pursuing research and other socially beneficial projects because they lack adequate financing. 100% of respondents indicated that Higher Education institutions have sought collaboration to create synergies, share resources and avoid duplication of effort. Among the main resource areas of cooperation identified in the study include information, physical facilities such as buildings and other technical equipment.

#### **8.1.2 Market Penetration**

Respondents cited that new Universities and colleges have offered joint programmes with established Universities as a measure to gain reputation and penetrate the market. As an example, one respondent cited that 'conventional Universities who offer parallel programmes in the major cities of the country on distance education were provided with lecture rooms and accommodation by other Colleges'. The Zimbabwe Open University, the country's only distance learning University frequently used Belvedere Teachers' College for lectures and examinations in Harare. Higher education institutions therefore broaden their market reach and accessibility through engaging into strategic partnerships with other institutions.

#### **8.1.3 Brand image**

Eighty percent of respondents identified enhancement of brand image as a major reason to pursue collaboration. The research revealed that local universities pursue collaboration with internationally recognised

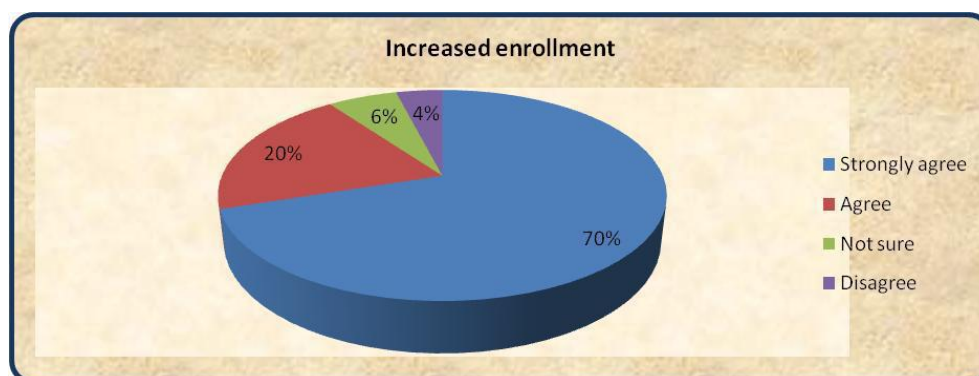
institutions to enhance their brand image. Association with internationally reputable universities enables local universities to leverage on brand association and the credibility of international universities.

## 8.2. Benefits of collaboration

### 8.2.1. Increased enrollment

Figure 1 shows that collaboration helps in improving enrollment. Respondents indicated that higher education institutions enter into collaborative agreements among themselves and with other organisations to increase enrollment. The Zimbabwe Open University has agreements with the Progressive Tobacco Farmers Union and Zimbabwe National Army which have helped to attract members from the said institutions. When asked if collaboration increased enrollment, 90% of respondents were in agreement, only 6% and 4% were not sure and disagreed respectively. Respondents argued that collaboration enhanced their organisations’ market reach. Association with established organisations was also identified as an important factor which improved the credibility of higher education institutions.

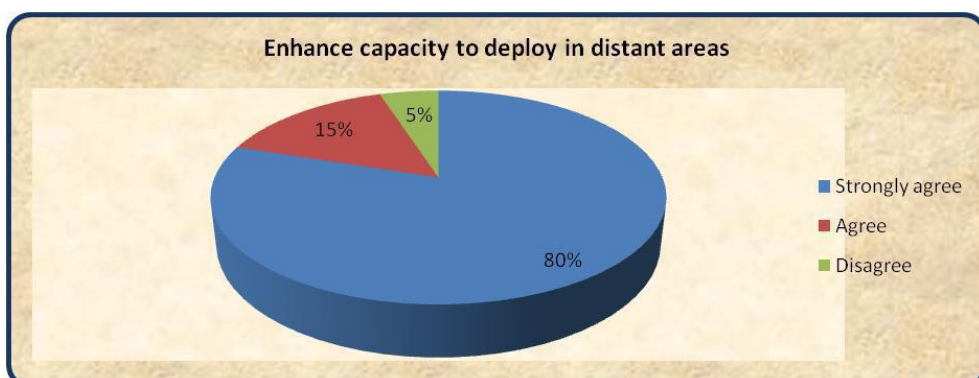
**Figure 1: Respondents’ views on whether collaboration improves enrolment**



### 8.2.2 Enhance capacity to deploy in remote areas at affordable cost

Collaboration was found useful by respondents in enhancing the capacity of Higher Education institutions to deploy in distant and remote areas. Figure 2 shows that 80% of respondents strongly indicated that collaboration enhanced the capacity to deploy in remote areas, 15% agreed while 5% disagreed. One respondent indicated that most higher education institutions in Zimbabwe were introducing parallel programmes, due to financial constraints; they could not build accommodation and offices for staff and learners. Collaboration has been effective in enabling these institutions to provide services at convenient places for their stakeholders.

**Figure 2: Respondents views on whether collaboration enhances the capacity of Higher Education institutions to deploy in distant and remote area**



Access to improved learner support services – the Zimbabwe Open University has managed to provide world-class library facilities for its learners through collaboration with the City of Harare Library.

Development of technical expertise and sharing of knowledge – The study revealed that higher education institutions engage other local and international institutions to seek enhanced technical capabilities and world class operating models

Table 1 shows that there was general agreement as to the benefits of collaboration among all the respondents. Twenty percent of the respondents strongly agreed while 70% agreed to the view that collaboration was beneficial in that it helped enhanced support to reach out to students Only 4% were in disagreement while 6% were not sure. In as far it helped in bringing about access to improved learner support, a majority of 80% of the respondents strongly agreed to this while 15% agreed with the remaining 5% not sure. Some 30 % of the respondents strongly agreed while 60% agreed that collaboration also helped in the development and sharing of technical expertise. Ten percent of the respondents were not sure on this. Asked if collaboration enhanced credibility of programmes, overwhelmingly, 20% and 6% of the respondents strongly agreed and agreed respectively with only 10% disagreeing and the other 5% not sure. This is the observed phenomenon given that Higher education institutions enter into collaborations and launch joint programmes with advisory boards so as to enhance the credibility of their programmes. It also helps in the development of curriculum which is relevant for industry. Over and above this, respondents are of the conviction that collaboration helped in increasing enrollment in the institutions of higher learning as shown by 75% who strongly agreed to this view and 15% agreed while a paltry 10% of the respondents were not sure. This might be so in that those institutions involved become well known as they collaborate with different institutions. Collaboration therefore, becomes a marketing platform resulting in increased enrolments.

**Table 1: Benefits of collaboration**

<i>Benefits of Collaboration</i>	<i>Strongly agree</i>	<i>Agree</i>	<i>Not sure</i>	<i>Disagree</i>
1. Enhanced support to reach out to students	20	70	6	4
2. Access to improved learner support	80	15	5	0
3. Development and sharing of technical expertise	30	60	10	0
4. Enhanced credibility of programmes	20	65	5	10
5. Increased enrollment	75	15	10	0

### 8.3 Key success factors in institutional collaboration

**Table 2: Key success factors in institutional collaboration**

Key success factors in institutional collaboration	Strongly agree
1. Availability of a national framework governing collaboration	96
2. Commitment and support by the responsible ministry	96
3. An agreed strategy with a clear vision and objectives	90
4. Review as part of Senate agenda	80
5. Collaboration as part of Strategic plan	90
6. Budgetary support	100
7. Strategic alignment of the agreements with core business	70
8. Transparency by both parties	64
9. Reciprocity between parties	70
10. Commitment by top managers	100
11. Good communication skills	100
12. Similarities in culture (organisational or national)	60
13. Availability of expertise in both institutions	50

Data in Table 2 show that 96% of the respondents indicated availability of a national framework governing collaboration and commitment and support by the responsible ministry as key success factors in institutional collaboration. Ninety percent suggested an agreed strategy with a clear vision and objectives as key success factor whereas 80% thought review as part of Senate agenda to be critical. Collaboration as part of Strategic plan was advocated for by another 90% while an overwhelming 100% stated budgetary support as a key factor. Strategic alignment of the agreements with core business accounted for 70% of the respondents while transparency by both parties and reciprocity between parties had 64% and 70% respectively. Commitment by top managers and good communication skills had 100% each while similarities in culture (organisational or national) and availability of expertise in both institutions accounted for 60% and 50% respectively.

### 8.4 Barriers to effective collaboration

Respondents in the various higher education institutions identified the following barriers to effective collaboration as shown on the table below.

Table 3 shows that 95% and 90% of the respondents indicated lack of financial resources and lack of role appreciation and understanding, respectively as barriers to collaboration. Some 80% stated unavailability of a mechanism for review as well as lack of direct responsibility and commitment by individuals as barriers. Seventy percent stated that different cultural backgrounds as barriers to collaboration.

**Table 3: Barriers to effective collaboration**

<i>Barriers to effective Collaboration</i>	<i>Percentage</i>
<b>1.</b> Lack of financial resources	<b>95</b>
<b>2.</b> Lack of role appreciation and understanding	<b>90</b>
<b>3.</b> Unavailability of a mechanism for review	<b>80</b>
<b>4.</b> Lack of direct responsibility and commitment by individuals	<b>80</b>
<b>5.</b> Different cultural backgrounds	<b>70</b>
<b>6.</b> lack of appreciation and understanding of each other's roles, strengths, weaknesses	<b>65</b>
<b>7.</b> lack of recognition for successful collaborative work	<b>70</b>
<b>8.</b> Inconsistent communication and lack of consultation which affect coordination	<b>90</b>
<b>9.</b> lack of direct responsibility and committed individuals on either side	<b>100</b>
<b>10.</b> Different priorities and lack of commitment to the partnerships	<b>70</b>
<b>11.</b> lack of knowledge of the agreements in the middle and lower hierarchies of the participating organisations	<b>50</b>
<b>12.</b> External environment variables which affect effective planning.	<b>75</b>

There was a general feeling among 65% of the respondents that lack of appreciation and understanding of each other's roles, strengths and weaknesses was a barrier to effective collaboration. Some 70% cited lack of recognition for successful collaborative work while an overwhelming majority of 90% indicated inconsistent communication and lack of consultation which affect coordination as affecting collaboration in the institutions under review. All the respondents, 100%, felt that lack of direct responsibility and committed individuals on either side were barriers to collaboration. Different priorities and lack of commitment to the partnerships were cited as barriers by 70% while 50% indicated lack of knowledge of the agreements in the middle and lower hierarchies of the participating organisations as hindrances to collaboration. Lastly, some 75% felt that external environment variables which affect effective planning were barriers to collaboration.

## 9. Conclusion

Collaboration presents a unique development opportunity for higher education institutions through sharing knowledge and technical expertise. The research concludes that effective collaboration requires active participation of both parties of an agreement and the creation of mutual benefits. The agreements, their possible benefits and implementation strategies must be communicated in both organisations at department level and specific responsibilities allocated to relevant departments and individuals. Commitment is required at both organisational and individual level.

The effectiveness of collaborations in Zimbabwe has been hindered by inadequate financial support which constrained the availability of resources and the capacity to fulfill obligations as per the agreements. The study also established that the unavailability of a mechanism for review as well as lack of direct responsibility and commitment by individuals acted as barriers to effective collaboration. The different cultural backgrounds of individuals in different institutions also had a bearing on effective collaboration.

## 10.Recommendations

The following are some of the strategies to enhance collaboration:

Establish concurrent monitoring and evaluation procedures and channels to correct problems

Cascade agreements to departmental level and establish mechanisms for cooperation of departments between the two institutions

Familiarise the staff of the participating organizations with the agreements in the collaboration.

Accord recognition for collaborative work.

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