



THE EDUCATION
COLLABORATIVE



2024

UNVEILING COLLABORATIVE LEARNING OUTCOMES

■ A SPOTLIGHT ON THE EAST AFRICA HUB (EA HUB)

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Acknowledgements

We thank The Education Collaborative and the entire East Africa Hub Secretariat for providing guidance and support. We also thank the strategic and technical committees of the East Africa Hub for their technical help and contribution in developing this paper.

Abstract

The collaborative framework described in this paper illustrates the effectiveness of pragmatic models in the collaborative inquiry. Two fundamental tenets—congenial and collegial—are used in four cases to highlight key milestones achieved through initiatives and support systems within the East Africa Hub. Each case’s milestones are described using content analysis and how the tenets fit the model framework vis-à-vis the collaborative paradigm adopted. Finally, the paper recommends scaling efforts to encourage more institutions to incorporate best practices of different institutional collaborations for capacity building and innovations. Institutions should make more concerted efforts to bolster additional collegial and congenial collaborative structures while ensuring a holistic approach in engaging all stakeholders for better student employment outcomes.

Keywords: employability, collaboration, higher education, congeniality, collegiality.



Background

Collaboration between universities and industries plays a fundamental role in the economic development of a country. Available literature also suggests that institutional collaborations significantly contribute to institutional ability to optimize efficiency and effectiveness for enhanced student learning outcomes (Peeters et al., 2019). Governing, regulatory bodies and industry have also advocated for more holistic collaborations in knowledge creation and research for improved student learning outcomes and organizational systems that provide comprehensive support services (Udeogalanya, 2020).

Therefore, it suffices to posit that collaboration among HEIs can positively impact students' career and employability outcomes by enriching their educational experiences, expanding their skills, and connecting them with a broader network of opportunities. When HEIs strategically work together to enhance employability, their graduates are better prepared to meet the job market demands and contribute effectively to their chosen careers.

Despite the recognition of the importance of collaboration among universities in Africa, there are still significant challenges that need to be addressed. These challenges can be attributed to various factors, including structural, cultural, and operational differences between Higher Education Institutions (HEIs) (Jacoby, 2003). Additionally, there is a lack of effective communication and information sharing between parties (Peeters et al., 2019), which further exacerbates the problem. Other issues that hinder collaboration include intellectual property rights, ownership of research outcomes, and data sharing, as well as insufficient infrastructural and financial support or incentives for collaboration. Furthermore, the lack of a collaborative vision, complex administrative processes, bureaucratic hurdles, language barriers, and geographic challenges all contribute to the problem. There is also a significant disparity in the capacity and capabilities of universities across Africa, which further complicates the issue. Moreover, over-reliance on external research funding, which can be unpredictable and competitive, and political barriers such as government policies or regulations, which can impact the ability of universities to work together, are also significant challenges. Finally, differing priorities among universities, with some focusing on research, some on teaching, and others on community engagement, affect the alignment of goals for collaboration. Addressing these challenges is crucial for improving collaboration among universities in Africa.

Collaboration among African universities is crucial for addressing regional and global issues, promoting research and innovation, and enhancing educational opportunities. Given the changing needs of the modern workforce and job market, adopting a practical model that encourages proactive engagement of HEIs in constructive dialogue, establishes clear partnership guidelines, seeks external funding sources, and fosters relationships based on trust and mutual learning is essential. This approach will help build a friendly and cooperative framework of collaboration that can be sustained in the long term.”



Review of Related Concept

Education Collaborative main objective is to harmonize the gaps in the higher education landscape which hamper the achievement of replicable educational outcomes in Africa. Leaders of higher education institutions from Boards of Trustees and University Councils to Vice Chancellors and Deputy Vice Chancellors to Deans, Chairs of Departments and Program Directors face a complex, challenging and rapidly changing environment. They are expected to operate effectively and strategically to give value proposition to the stake holders in higher education. Their qualifications and skills as successful faculty or leaders in the private and public sectors are often not enough to guarantee success in the institutional and administrative leadership of a university.

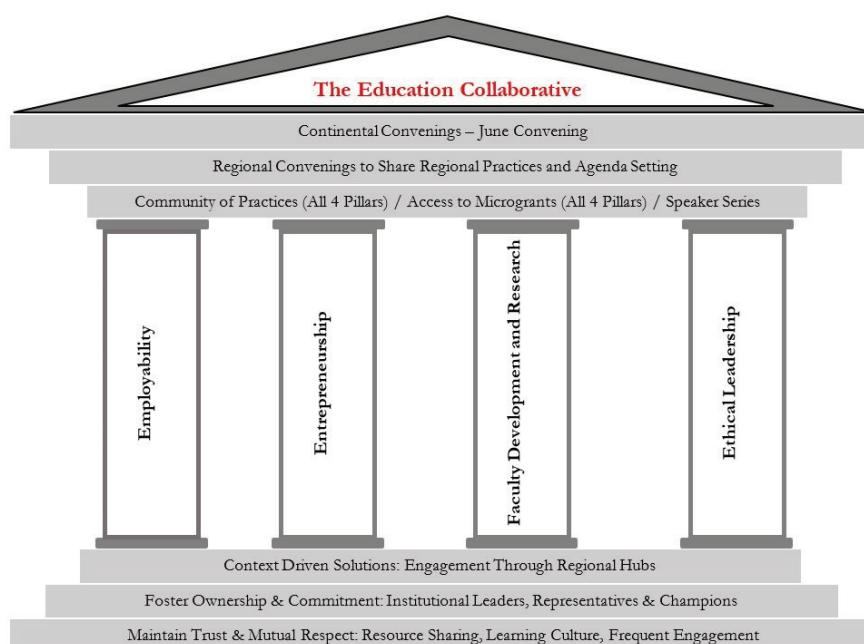
Education Collaborative purposes to address one of the most pressing capacity challenges facing African universities and other tertiary institutions through collegiality and congeniality of systems involving all stake holders to incorporate best practices of different institutional collaborations for capacity building and innovations. Available literature further corroborates this fact that without joint efforts individual initiatives will not bear phenomenal and replicable outcomes to align Africa to the SGDs.

Why Collaborate: The Education Collaborative Inquiry

Barth (1990) and Rodrigues (2010) speak vastly on building institutional relationships through trust, loyalty, informality, mutual respect, shared work values, mutual learning, and mentorship. Careful synthesis of the literature on failed attempts of different collaborative approaches alludes to lack of research on how to enable institutions to conduct collaborative work and a failure to consider the unique and sometimes conservative contexts in which institutions operate (McNamara et al. 2020; Kezar, 2005 and Jha, 2016).

The model presented by The Education Collaborative holds great promise, as it seeks to address the deficiencies that currently plague the higher education sector. By establishing regional hubs, The Education Collaborative's model capitalizes on the congenial culture in Africa's sub-regions to create an ecosystem of higher learning institutions that share a unified vision and mutual trust. This, in turn, raises the standards for higher education outcomes and fosters institutional collegial cooperation.

The model focuses on key thematic areas that drive impact across institutions, including employability, faculty development and research, entrepreneurship, and ethical leadership. Doing so aims to solve challenges often contradict the collaborative paradigm and the real world. To cater to the unique contexts of institutions, the model leverages trust and mutual respect to build the foundation on which collaborations can be built through different support pillars (refer to Figure 1).



Whereas the uniqueness of member institutions remains, the collaborative approach adopted here paves the way for a paradigm shift towards a more collective and aligned approach where institutions work together towards the same goal rather than working to help each other achieve individual goals that are only unique to each other. This approach provides for sustainable mutual learning where institutions are on the agenda as a collective and drive impact through holistic approaches, including committing resources and expertise to support other institutions and building systems and operations to improve outcomes. Several critical initiatives in the East Africa Regional Hub hosted by Rongo University, one of the regional hubs for the Education Collaborative, present a distinct case demonstrating the model's uniqueness and effectiveness through milestones from two key projects being implemented in the Hub. These projects are the Soft Skills and Career Development Programme, and Systems Change Program for Employability which have played a key role in shaping the holistic growth of students as discussed in the section below.

Discussion on Learning Outcomes

The Soft Skills and Career Development Program (SCAD)

True to what Rodrigues (2010) describes as pillars of successful institutional collaboration (cooperation and mutual learning, mentoring, inter-institutional visitations, and facilitation) and Barth's (1990) collegial relationships (mutual respect, shared work values, and specific conversations about teaching and learning), SCAD endeavours to leverage synergies between Kepler and Rwanda Polytechnic to enhance students' academic and professional outcomes. Through mutual respect and trust, the collaboration also uses a network of available institutions and learning platforms to develop and implement customized soft skills curricula. The systemic programs created are crucial to building the academic rigor for the modern workforce and the practical skills and competencies demanded.

More so, through learning from benchmarking opportunities and practical training for trainers from lead institutions and sometimes guests, the program has impacted over 70 teaching staff members and over 500 students in the 18 months period. Additionally, the program has also created a cascading effect towards transforming old teaching methods by enabling them to lead student-centered training models, thus exponentially increasing the program's ability to drive students' outcomes. With workshop-style sessions, trainers are equipped to lead student-centered class sessions for soft skills development. This process first trains trainers to lead student-centered class sessions focusing on developing soft skills such as communication, critical thinking, and teamwork. Trainers receive guidance on the principles and techniques required for creating engaging, interactive, and student-driven learning experiences.

Upon completion, new trainers practice their skills in a supportive environment by conducting similar classes with their peers. They also receive feedback from peers and experts. Ultimately, all trainers who gain mastery form a network capable of training other trainers. They also play a pivotal role in facilitating student sessions. This cascading effect enables collaborating institutions to self-learn and leverage the opportunities accorded while perpetually passing down and disseminating the knowledge and skills for student-centered education in soft skills. Amidst competition amongst institutions in the region and around the globe, the collaboration observed in the program attests to literature findings that support collaboration as a pathway to achieve greater student outcomes while offering learning opportunities beyond the classroom (Zhang & Goh, 2022; Eddy, 2010; Al-Youbi, Zahend & Tiarney, 2020).

The Soft Skills and Career Development Program (SCAD)

The Systems Change Program for Employability demonstrates the capability of collaborative efforts to catalyze sustainable impact in higher education. Since its launch in 2021, the program has achieved significant milestones, leaving an indelible mark on its four participating higher learning institutions. Through the program's approach, the program has enabled the University of Cape Coast, Burkina Institute of Technology, Accra Technical University and Rwanda Polytechnic to impact over 4,000 students by developing new systems or revamping existing ones (E.g. Career service activities, different student career readiness training etc.) to galvanize institutional efforts to improve student outcomes. Central to this success is the program's approach through collaborative mentorship, which has proven to be a transformative drive for helping institutions build and sustain employability systems.

In order to facilitate institutional transformation, a rigorous training program is implemented for onboarded institutions.

This program spans three months and focuses on understanding transformation theories, such as the theory of change. Following this, institutions are assigned a mentor for a period of 15 months, during which they receive support from other mentors and exemplar institutions in the network. This support is aimed at benchmarking and identifying institutional needs, developing an institution-wide project, and receiving a proof-of-concept grant for 12 months to pilot key high-impact goals within their project.

In addition to this, institutions continue to receive further support for an additional three years. This comprehensive approach ensures that institutions are well-equipped to achieve their transformation goals and make a positive impact in their respective fields.”

Thus, and indubitably so, one of the standout achievements of the program—the creation and institutionalization of eight new systems developed by Kepler Rwanda Polytechnic, University of Cape Coast, and Burkina Institute of Technology to enhance employability outcomes within participating institutions across the continent—can be attributed to the holistic approach adopted by the program’s model. Through the pragmatic mentorship approach supported by the program (i.e., job shadowing, benchmarking, etc.), the systems created are tailored to specific challenges and opportunities for each institution through needs assessment. The level of customization enabled by the model continues to be central to driving sustainable change. Furthermore, through capacity building of senior faculty members in participating institutions, the program is building sustainable institutional collegial and congenial collaborations and fostering a continuous learning platform to build change agents with the requisite skills to lead and scale systemic transformation efforts.

Moreover, by granting participating institutions access to a diverse pool of expertise and other exemplar institutions, the model guarantees to a high degree a sustained culture of continuous improvement and innovation through employability systems in higher learning institutions. It also builds and sustains a dynamic ecosystem of learning and growth through the ethos necessary to strengthen institutional systems and a culture of adaptability and innovation by facilitating higher levels of collaboration between individuals (mentors and mentees) as well as institutions through mutual respect, shared work values, and cooperation (Duze, 2011, and Barth, 1990).

Co-Organizing Convenings: A Collegial Approach to Owning the Transformation Agenda

The East Africa Hub conducted two successful convenings the first one took place on October 10th and 11th in Kigali, Rwanda which served as a platform to connect university leaders and higher-ed administrators across East Africa to share best practices, tools and resources, and develop networks and collaborations. It focused on Employability Ecosystems within higher education institutions. The second convening was held on 5th and 6th October 2023 at Kampala, Uganda to further enhance the Education Collaborative initiatives and to evaluate the impact on educational outcomes.

The existence of a supporting platform to nurture collegial and congenial cooperation is critical to sustaining long-term institutional relationships. To optimize the use of resources while nurturing a culture where participating institutions are also enabled to own the agenda, The Education Collaborative continues to adopt a “co-organization” approach to all convenings that is key to shaping the agenda of all regions impacted. This approach engages institutions from inception to design and implement annual convenings. This has cultivated a sense of ownership and commitment throughout the network. More so, this approach has led to a remarkable outcome where institutions have availed more than 20 senior staff and more than 10 students to contribute to the agenda-setting process and implementation as resource persons and volunteers, respectively.

In particular, co-organizing convenings by engaging regional institutions to participate in hosting them, collaborating to plan and run convening sessions, and sharing resources continues to enrich the quality and diversity of discussions in the network, as well as first ownership and commitment. This methodology fosters a comprehensive and holistic approach to setting priorities and ensures deeper reflections of the broader interests and concerns of the participating institutions. Through this approach, convenings have become one of the more effective platforms for constructive dialogue, leading to informed decision-making and strategic planning, commitment setting, and network building with over 30 institutions engaged across the continent and in the East Africa sub-region.

Microgrants : A Congenial Approach to Foster and Accelerate Innovations

Bridgstock and Jackson (2019) propose actionable principles to enhance employability by adopting a systematic, explicit, and evidence-based approach. These principles help determine the desired balance of employability views and outcomes for each program and develop a programmatic approach to employability that reflects the desired balance of aims.

Therefore, by availing microgrants, the model continues to nurture an enabling environment for collegial relationships where institutions can pilot proof-of-concept collaborative initiatives with the potential to scale. Moreover, this approach is pivotal in enabling institutions to explore new ideas and concepts where resources are scarce and priorities conflict. This approach also helps institutions benefit from innovative initiatives and leverage data and evidence to scale by assessing the viability and effectiveness of novel approaches, technologies, or methodologies using the low-risk but high-reward opportunity the grants offer. Using the existing trust already established in the network, the approach also offers an enabling environment where shared values, goals, and impact are scaled by paying it forward.

With over eight models already piloted or being piloted, the impact on student outcomes and systems' improvement continues to nurture innovations and foster creativity within institutions. This is particularly around pedagogical approaches to 21st-century skills, leveraging technology to enhance institutions' career support and services capabilities, community engagement, and development. Notwithstanding, microgrants continue to provide an alternative pathway to test and advocate for programs with significant positive ripple effects on student outcomes through an evidence-based approach while bypassing issues of institutional prioritization that have resource allocation implications. They also allow other institutions to learn, replicate, or adapt the tested models by demonstrating their effectiveness and outcomes.

Conclusion and Recommendations

Milestones achieved through projects presented in this paper highlight the significance of collaboration in higher education institutions as: Shaping the landscape of higher education across the African continent, particularly within the dynamic East Africa Hub making remarkable strides braving barriers and advanced joint initiatives, leading to the transformation of higher learning institutions in the region; Acting as catalyst that propels universities towards excellence, innovation, and relevance in an ever-evolving world to truly equip our students with the skills and values for success, we must embrace collaboration as an essential tool: Witnessed a myriad of exciting milestones that underscore the transformative power of collaboration from the joint research projects breaking new ground in innovation to cross-disciplinary initiatives providing creative problem-solving mechanisms, our universities are setting new standards for what can be achieved when diverse minds come together with a shared purpose: These efforts not only enhance the employability of our graduates but also coagulate East Africa's position as a hub of innovation and knowledge: Encompass entrepreneurship and faculty development enabling educators to share best practices, pool resources, and expose faculty members to a wider range of perspectives: Ethics, a cornerstone of any higher learning institution, are nurtured through collaboration that encourages dialogue and understanding.

Consequently, milestones presented underscore the transformative potential of congenial and collegial tenets of cooperation in pragmatic, collaborative approaches. The implication of these milestones also spans from enhancing the quality of teaching and learning experiences and promoting institutional innovations to nurturing a vibrant academic community across the continent. Therefore, support is strongly given to adopting pragmatic approaches that avail alternative pathways necessary to nurture progressive congenial and collegial collaboration. The foregoing should also be conceptualized as a central means to elevate the academic landscape in the region and the continent to nurture a supportive, inclusive education environment.

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