

## **Promoting and managing links with universities in Africa**

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Today in many universities of the world the International Office handles international relations and co-operation with other universities. The University of Port Harcourt does not have an International Office such as most other universities. Rather, the Exchange and Linkage Programmes Unit of the Vice-Chancellor's Office deals with matters of co-operation. This unit also has responsibility for all relations with all outsiders, dealing with donor organizations, and in particular, for developing university'industry relations and university'university co-operation, within and outside Nigeria. The Exchange and Linkage Programmes Unit has been involved with the establishment of collaborative links with a number of tertiary institutions in Africa during the past three years. Although three years is a rather short period in which to appraise this effort, the experience acquired in the process has been as rewarding as it has been challenging. The high points of the effort of developing links between the University of Port Harcourt and universities in the ECOWAS and SADC sub-regions are presented.

### **Introduction**

The University of Port Harcourt has had some experience of international co-operation in higher education with institutions in the UK, Canada, and the US. In the 1980s it maintained link arrangements with the University of Newcastle upon Tyne in the UK and the University of Windsor in Canada. More recently, it has developed collaborative agreements for student and staff exchange with the Pittsburg State University (PSU), Kansas; as well as the Agricultural Centre, Louisiana State University and Baton Rouge, both in the US. Although the University has had academic contacts with institutions in Africa, formal institution-to-institution links have been very few.

### **Mechanisms for promoting collaboration**

A number of strategies are available for developing collaborative links for educational co-operation between universities and HE institutions. These include student exchange, the year abroad, staff development, external examinations, staff exchange, sabbaticals, joint research, split-site programmes for higher degrees, and curriculum development. The

agreement in the form of a Memorandum of Understanding (MOU), which we have exchanged with each of the four institutions with which we have developed links, provides for the adoption of some or all of these strategies as the mechanism for giving effect to the link.

However, our current activities within the links have focused on three major areas, namely, study abroad arrangements, student exchange, and staff development. These are discussed with the hope of sharing experience concerning what works and how to handle the challenges that arise.

### ***Study abroad programme***

The University of Port Harcourt (UNIPORT) has used the study abroad scheme for the language immersion requirements of the French language studies programme of the Department of Foreign Languages and Literatures (FNLL) from the inception of the scheme in 1977. From 1977 to the mid-1980s, our students were sent to Université de Grenoble III, Grenoble, France, for one year. The aim of the scheme was to provide the students with the opportunity to study the French language in France, improve their communication skills in the language, and experience French culture. Students had the option of living either in dormitories in the host institution or staying with French families. With the decline in the economy, however, the cost of sending students to France for a year became unaffordable for the sponsors and the University turned to the Francophone countries in the ECOWAS region. Between 1987 and 2001 we had two collaborative arrangements in place for the study abroad programme with universities in Togo and the Ivory Coast.

### ***Student exchange***

Student exchange is important for promoting student mobility, for assisting young people who are the potential world leaders of tomorrow to develop intercultural skills, and for fostering global interaction in education. Our first attempt at student exchange with an institution in the ECOWAS region was negotiated with Université Nationale du Bénin, now Université d'Abomey Calavi (UAC), in 2000. In addition to securing placement for our students of FNLL for the French language immersion scheme, the aim of the exchange with UAC was also to promote student mobility, increase cultural contacts, and to forge even closer ties between the two neighbouring countries.

### ***Academic staff development***

The long period of military rule and bad governance in Nigeria brought about the collapse of the economy. At the same time new universities were founded. Enrolment increased by nearly 500%, while the entire system

was grossly under-funded. Many of its senior and experienced academic people left the country, and western universities severed academic contacts. Our University " because of its location in the hub of the oil industry " lost a considerable number of very good teaching staff to the petroleum sector. Therefore, academic staff development is an important aspect of our efforts at inter-institutional academic linkages. It is one of the key objectives of our Strategic Plan 2003" 13.

We are doing this through postgraduate training and periods of study/training attachment.

Although there are facilities for "growing our own timber" in other Nigerian universities, after long years of isolation the University feels that there is need to build critical mass in many areas, and reposition itself to engage with the global knowledge economy. Therefore, young and up-and-coming academic staff must be trained, upgraded, and exposed.

Collaboration with universities outside Nigeria, particularly with universities in other countries within Africa where the resources exist, presents the best approach towards achieving this aim. By that means, our staff members can be placed in postgraduate and training programmes at the partner institutions to undergo studies for higher degrees, or learn new techniques.

There are advantages in this approach. Firstly, because the trainees have the chance to work in conditions more or less similar to what they know, there is a greater chance that they will return at the end of their studies. Secondly, it is less expensive than providing the same quality of training in Europe, Canada or the US. Where the host institution also waives fees or provides scholarships/fellowships or helps to source for funds to support the programme, this can be an added bonus for the success of the scheme. Our links with the University of the Witwatersrand (Wits), the University of Natal (NU), and the University of Cape Town (UCT) have greatly benefited from that kind of generosity.

Prior to 1999, UNIPORT had no contacts with any university in South Africa. However, in August 2000, our vice-chancellor received a memorandum from the National Universities Commission in Abuja informing the University that the governments of Nigeria and South Africa had signed an agreement on educational co-operation between the two countries. The University was asked in the same memorandum to submit proposals in fields of engineering for collaboration between universities in South Africa. No particular universities were mentioned.

This memorandum was passed to the Linkage and Exchange Unit which then asked for and received proposals from the departments of Civil, Chemical, Electrical and Electronics, Mechanical, and Petroleum Engineering. The departments were encouraged to go to the Web and to use information from the current World of Learning. No guidelines were issued and

departments were expected to decide for themselves with which universities to collaborate. The following selection of institutions, which emerged from this exercise, was very interesting:

- Chemical Engineering: UCT, NU and Pretoria.
- Civil Engineering: UCT, NU and Wits.
- Electrical Engineering: UCT, NU and Durban-Westville.
- Mechanical Engineering: UCT, NU and Wits.
- Petroleum Engineering: UCT, NU and Pretoria.

In all, the departments elected to collaborate with five universities. All five departments chose UCT and NU while Pretoria and Wits each was chosen by two and Durban-Westville by only one department. All five departments wanted collaboration involving staff exchange, joint research, staff development, sabbaticals, curriculum development, and student exchange.

The proposals submitted by the departments were forwarded unedited to the NUC and the Federal Ministry of Education in September 2000. Copies were also sent to the vice-chancellors of each of the five South African institutions. Only one response came by year's end. It was from UCT. This was followed by a response in January from Wits. The proposals had been sent to the appropriate units of the universities, and we would hear from them in due course.

Realizing that we had had no previous contacts with anyone in these institutions, we wrote to each of the universities in March 2001, proposing a visit to each of them in April 2001, by a delegation from UNIPORT. The response we got from UCT and Wits was promising. The delegation would be welcome to visit but the timing would have to be worked out. However, new cuts in grants to the University meant there were no funds to support two persons. We were able to secure funding support for the trip from the Ford Foundation in May 2001, and proposed new dates in November for abl

were drawn from three faculties and the university library. Two went to Wits, four to UCT, and three to the Nelson Mandela School of Medicine, NU.

### **Case studies**

#### ***Co-operation with Universite a" Abidjan, Cocody, Abidjan***

The language immersion scheme was the primary impetus for seeking co-operation with regional institutions. Our first collaborative arrangement for that purpose was with the Centre International de recherche et d' e'tude de langue, Village de Benin, Lome, Togo in 1984. Thirty students were sent to that centre annually from 1985 to 1998. Following allegations of indiscipline and misconduct by our students the arrangement was terminated in 1998.

A new arrangement was then made with the Universite' d' Abidjan, Cocody, Abidjan, in the Ivory Coast, in the same year. The first batch of students from Port Harcourt went to Cocody in November 1999. Under this arrangement, our students paid the fees to the host institution, received instructions, and were assessed like the home students. However, the students were left largely unsupervised and by 2000 the problems of indiscipline that ended the arrangements in Lome were beginning to resurface in Cocody. Periodic inspection visits by staff members from Port Harcourt to the host university was introduced. This added to the cost of administering the programme. Therefore, the leadership in FNLL decided to consider alternatives. One of these was to send students to the French Language Village in Badagry, outside Lagos. The other was to send them to UAC, three hours away from Lagos.

#### ***Co-operation with UAC, Cotonou***

UAC was selected because it offered a better chance of achieving the aims of the immersion than the French Language Village in Badagry. Discussions with UAC on the possibilities of co-operation were opened by phone and mail in November 2000. This was made possible by an earlier contact made in October of the same year with the Director of International Co-operation of UAC during the International Seminar on European and Developing Countries University Collaboration held in Sassari, Italy. A team from UNIPORT consisting of the Director, ELPD and the Head, FNLL

students by the host institution.

By June 2001 the officials of UNIPORT had signed the MOU. The vice-rector and rector at UAC were prepared to do so. However, the faculty and departmental leaders in the *Faculte des LettresArts & Sciences Humaines* and *Departement des Sciences du Langage et de la Communication* refused to sign it. Their reasons were that firstly, they were not party to the drawing up of the MOU and secondly they wanted lecturers to be paid for their services. Further talks were held during which the benefits to each institution were fully discussed and agreed on, and the concept of reciprocity in the arrangements was explained to all parties. At the end of that round of talks, the objectors were won over. But the arrangement had lost its impetus. Then came a change in the leadership of FNLL in UNIPORT and the arrangements were not attended to for more than a year. However, with another change in leadership in FNLL that took place in June 2003, there was renewed interest in pursuing the link with UAC to its conclusion. As this case shows, the influence of role players in negotiating and concluding the arrangements for collaborative links cannot be underestimated.

#### ***Co-operation with Wits***

Negotiations with Wits started during our first visit to that institution on 7 January 2002. The itinerary was worked out in conjunction with the International Office at Wits. The team from UNIPORT comprised the Dean of Engineering and myself. We held separate meetings with the Director of the International Office, with the Dean of Engineering and the Built Environment and the Head of Civil Engineering. In the final meeting the Dean of Engineering and the Built Environment, the Head of Civil Engineering, the Director of the International Office, and the Registrar of the University were also present. These meetings were very fruitful. Almost everybody who participated had been in Nigeria before and had knowledge of the conditions in the country.

A broad agreement was reached on the specific contents of the collaboration, i.e. staff development, staff exchange, exchange of graduate students, and joint research. The agreement was to be formalized by the signing of an MOU at some later date. It took another year and a second visit to work out the contents of the MOU. The finer details in the agreement were agreed on at a meeting at Wits between the Deputy Vice-Chancellor in charge of Academic Affairs and the Vice-Chancellor of UNIPORT. The agreement between the two institutions was signed in March 2003 and the first two members of UNIPORT staff were placed in the Medical School and in the Department of Civil Engineering for study/training.

There were communication difficulties between Port Harcourt and Johannesburg. The e-mails bounced back a number of times but we

persisted. The role of the International Office at Wits was very critical. It learnt to live with the frustrating delays in communication; and co-ordinated the events associated with the visits, the meetings, the preparation of the agreement and the signing thereof. In the end, getting the collaboration from the ground was possible, only because every one involved in the arrangements, the vice-chancellors and their deputy vice-chancellors, the deans of Engineering and the Medical School, all showed commitment to the venture.

### **Co-operation with NU**

Negotiations with NU started on January 8, 2003. Before the visit, we had established some contact with the International Office at NU through a member of staff of that institution who was at the International Conference on Co-operation between European and Developing Countries' Universities in Sassari. We had exchanged a couple of letters and e-mails, and the territory was already looking familiar. We held two meetings with officials of NU. One was with the Director and other officials of the International Office. The second meeting that was also attended by the officials of the International Office was held with the Dean, Heads of Chemical, Civil, Electrical and Electronics, and Mechanical Engineering. Apart from the earlier contact noted above, it turned out that the Head of Electrical and Electronics Engineering was known to one of us. The discussions at NU were therefore much less formal. Staff exchange, external examination, study visits, and joint research were identified as possible areas of co-operation.

NU has a standard template for the MOU. This was given to our delegation to take back. Co-operation would begin as soon as the MOU was signed, and activities could start with external examinations. In March 2003 the Vice-Chancellor of UNIPORT visited NU for the signing of the MOU. That ceremony signalled the beginning of formal co-operation between the two institutions. During that visit, our delegation held meetings with the officials of the International Office, the Faculty of Engineering, the Dean of the Nelson Mandela Medical School, and with the Vice-Chancellor of NU. The meetings were a great success. The first set of three members of staff from UNIPORT commenced their training in the Nelson Mandela Medical School in July 2003.

Apart from the existence of previous contact, the importance of the meeting of minds in the process of developing the collaboration with NU cannot be overemphasized. This occurred during the meetings between the Dean of the Nelson Mandela Medical School and the Vice-Chancellor of UNIPORT. This was the first meeting between the two gentlemen. However, there was immediately a sense of shared ideals and shared purpose between them. It took but a short time for them to agree on all the issues. They were

prepared to push on with the co-operation, difficulties and all.

The role of the International Office at NU in facilitating the meetings and co-ordinating the events was also crucial. Again they endured the endless delays in correspondence. It is largely owing to their persistence that we were able to take the first steps to kick-start the collaboration.

### ***Co-operation with UCT***

Formal negotiations with UCT took place during our first visit on January 9, 2002. We met with officials of the International Academic Programmes Office, with the Head of the Geomatics Department, and the Dean of Engineering during that first visit. Before our arrival in Cape Town, UCT was interested only in collaboration in Mechanical Engineering, and there had been an exchange of correspondence between the Heads of Mechanical Engineering on both sides. During the discussions, the scope of co-operation was expanded to include geomatics, and research collaboration in catalytic processes. The actual co-operation would begin after the parties had signed the MOU.

In March 2003, the UNIPORT vice-chancellor visited UCT. A second round of meetings was held with the Head of Geomatics and Mechanical Engineering, the Dean of Education, and the vice-chancellor of UCT. At the end of these meetings the two vice-chancellors signed the MOU. This marked the formal beginning of the collaborative link between the two universities, and in July, three of our members staff left for short-term study visits to UCT: one in the department of Geomatics, the second in the UCT libraries, and the third in the Medical School. Needless to say that getting started was not easy. Previous contact between the two vice-chancellors was very helpful. As in the two cases before, the International Academic Programmes Office played a major role. Their competence and dedication has been the key to the success so far attained.

### **Lessons learned**

#### ***Funding***

Co-operation activities generate costs over and above those that can be met from the recurrent grants to the universities. Salaries, allowances and a fair budget, travel and subsistence costs must be provided from elsewhere. Once the co-operation activities increase, funds will be required to finance travel and subsistence in order to maintain a regular pattern of exchanges. Even if funding support can be obtained from sponsors, the institutions will still be required to make some substantial financial commitment to the maintenance of the co-operation.

### **Communication**

The parties negotiating the collaboration must communicate regularly. Unreliable communication causes delay and frustration to both sides. Therefore, those representing the potential partners must constantly communicate to ensure that misunderstanding and doubt do not creep in. Furthermore, it is helpful to allow the personnel, on both sides that have been communicating with each other, to see the arrangements to the end before being moved to other functions. Each time the desk officer on the linkage arrangement is changed, the process is thrown back three months. This can cause serious misunderstanding.

### **Benefits for everybody**

There must be something in the collaboration arrangement, not only for the institutional parties, but also for all role players. The case of forging relations with the UBC eloquently illustrates the point. Even when the top management of the institution had agreed that their institution would benefit and they were willing to sign the MOU, the leadership and operators at faculty and departmental levels were poised to scuttle the agreement because they did not immediately see benefits for themselves.

### **Ownership**

For the co-operation to succeed, the people at grass roots who will undertake the tasks involved must know about it, and accept that it belongs to them. Ideally, only the people who will have something to do with the partnership should initiate it. The proposals for co-operation should be presented to all role players in a manner that will evoke their trust and win support. It is also necessary that they participate in some way or be represented in the negotiations and decision-making process. Direct discussions with the Deans of Faculty and Heads of Department facilitated our links with Wits, NU, and UCT, and in the end helped to assuage misconceptions in our negotiations at UAC.

### **Common goals**

it is very difficult to initiate and sustain the collaboration if the potential partners have no common goals or aims. Therefore, the goals and objectives of the collaboration must be agreed on, and where possible shared aims developed. Furthermore, the interests of every party in the collaborative venture must be recognized and protected.

### ***Previous contact or working relationship***

Another important lesson to be learned is that collaboration between institutions is difficult to initiate and develop without previous personal or working relationships between the potential partners. Negotiations with NU, UNB, UCT and Wits were all greatly assisted by previous contacts. And in all cases discussions during the second visits were less formal and more relaxed. The meetings of the vice-chancellors were very interesting to observe. With a previous contact, there was a feeling of coming together as old friends; conversation was easy-going, and pleasant. On the other hand, where there was no pre-existing contact, the atmosphere was stiff and frosty, or at best hesitant.

### ***Support of the vice-chancellor and principal officers***

The support and personal commitment of the vice-chancellors is an absolute must. The bursar, deans of faculties, heads of departments and other decision-makers must also support the effort. Without these, there is little chance of success.

### ***Institutional cultures***

Institutions have different cultures. This must be recognized and appreciated by the parties. Some institutions insist on very strict formalities to the point that may seem discourteous to others. It is helpful to ask questions beforehand about what is expected.

### ***Time is required***

Negotiating a partnership takes time. It cannot be hurried, and there are no quick solutions. Even if those directly involved with the negotiations are determined to proceed speedily, the lawyers will pick holes in it and cause delays.

## **Challenges**

### ***Co-ordination and communication***

Initiating a co-operation arrangement up to the exchange of the MOU is a long and difficult path to tread. It is exceptionally hard when you are working with academic colleagues. Academic staff is not known to work to a time schedule. In fact many resist it. A proposal, or a CV that is due on Monday of this week, will be dropped in your mailbox, Friday next week, after office hours! Making sure that the scheme takes wing is even more difficult. It requires constant communication between the parties to work out details. Participants in the scheme must be advised to provide information that the other side requires to conclude visa or accommodation arrangements in time.

***Widening the scope of co-operation***

The second major task facing the partners is how to implement other aspects of the agreement and increase the activities of the co-operation. Short-term staff visits for external examinations and short courses are the obvious first strategies for achieving this. The Senate of UNIPORT has approved the nomination of three examiners from NU for the Faculty of Engineering. The vice-chancellor has sent invitations to a professor of Geomatics from UCT to come for a short-term visit of up to three months, and the Dean of the Nelson Mandela Medical School to visit at some agreed on date. Discussions are already ongoing between the vice-chancellors of UCT and UNIPORT concerning how to raise funds jointly to finance future activities.

***Financing of future activities***

Developing and maintaining a relationship of co-operation with institutions outside the country requires money. Unless the potential partners are funded by a third party, or are prepared to foot the bill, it will be difficult to further co-operation. The Ford Foundation paid for the first visits that enabled us to establish the initial contact with Wits, NU and UCT, and provided travel support for the second visit. Our current staff development initiative is supported by a grant for improving the quality of teaching staff provided by the John D. and Catherine T. MacArthur Foundation. Although UNIPORT has made its own contribution to the costs, it would have been impossible to establish the links with these institutions without the generous support of the two bodies.

**Conclusion**

Collaboration can only thrive where there are mutual benefits for all the parties. There is no monetary reward for anyone in these links. Therefore benefits cannot be assessed in terms of financial rewards that might come to either the

in the institutions in South Africa. If these pioneers are able to maintain these contacts and expand them to include other individuals with similar interests or goals, the multiple effects will be incalculable. And when we achieve a regular movement of staff from both sides, the collaboration will not be limited to just the few individual academic staff involved, but will be extended to the departments in which they work. We expect this type of co-operation to go on for many years, and in time, research networks between the two countries to emerge from these humble beginnings.