

Collaboration and Networking in Distance Learning: The experience of the University of the West Indies with the M.Sc. Counselling Programme by Distance Education

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Abstract

The University of the West Indies (UWI), through its commitment to education and training, seeks to expand the number of university trained personnel in the Caribbean and to promote distance education in the region. In response to this mandate the UWI has pioneered the delivery of its first M.Sc. Counselling Programme by Distance Education which is currently helping to build capacity in human services. The programme which originated in the Fertility Management Unit, Faculty of Medical Sciences, Mona, in 2002, trained eighty-two professionals in nine Caribbean countries and produced sixty-five graduates in 2005.

In implementing this programme, the UWI has had to carefully forge alliances with governmental and non-governmental agencies to support professionals who can simultaneously be in practice, access training and apply new learning. These kinds of collaborative relationships and networking are critical to the programme's agenda.

The UWI's experience with the M.Sc. Counselling programme opens up new avenues for exploring its collaborative challenges re preparedness for distance education, the type and format of the programme, recruitment, affordability and the programme's role in the region's development.

The MSc Counselling Programme by Distance Education at The University of the West Indies (UWI), Mona, is a regional higher educational initiative which is delivered using a network of collaborative relationships both within and outside of the University. Higher education programmes at the University, including the MSc Counselling Programme, are supported by collaborative relationships which enhance their sustainability. This paper examines the dynamics of these relationships against the background of regional development.

The context of UWI's collaboration for higher education

Strategically positioned as the leading educational institution in the region, the UWI is an important channel to generate new knowledge and skills through higher education. Beckles, et al (2002), describe the University as the institution that is the most important pedagogical force for the achievement of a new strategy of economic and social transformation and development. The UWI's perception of this position is reinforced by its 2002-2007 strategic plan to expand the number of University trained personnel in the Caribbean Region and to strengthen capacity building through the development of human capital. The UWI therefore recognises the importance of student enrolment in higher education as a key indicator of economic development.¹

A major challenge that the institution faces in this regard is that while it is seeking to address the developmental needs of the region, through higher education, it is at the same time constrained by the realities that face the region as a whole. The foremost realities are that Caribbean countries:

- Are small disparate nation states with scarce resources and limited opportunities
- Are subject to brain drain which occurs as an offshoot of limited opportunities in the region
- Have high levels of unemployment and underemployment that influence high poverty levels
- Have high debt and low or negative economic growth rates
- Have relatively low levels of enrolment in higher education programmes.

Given these realities, the UWI has had to devise innovative means of ensuring that its educational mandate for the region is fulfilled. The chief means has been its move towards institutional diversification evident in its renewed thrust towards distance learning programmes, its collaborative partnerships with community colleges, polytechnics and adult continuing education schools.

Of importance have been the collaborative partnerships that UWI has forged with the Governments of the region, to support the training of professionals who need to remain employed while pursuing higher education. These collaborative partnerships have proved necessary as they ensure that the already scarce resource of human capital was not lost to the labour market while individuals advanced their educational status. To that extent, collaborative and networking relationships have become increasingly integral to the development and delivery of higher education programmes at the UWI, especially those programmes that are delivered via the Open and Distance Learning (ODL) mode.

The UWI has a proven track record of collaborative partnerships with various Governmental and Non Governmental Organisations throughout the region to actively promote and train professionals in Health and Family Life Education for almost two decades. When the UWI took the decision to deliver the MSc. Counselling Programme by Distance Education in 2002, it was within an established regional collaborative framework.

The start of the MSc Counselling Programme represented a specific way in which the institution sought to expand opportunities for learning among a diverse group of human service professionals from the health, education, social services and community development sectors in the English-speaking Caribbean. As a developmental initiative, the programme was designed in response to the need for trained counsellors to contribute to the psychological health and well being of our Caribbean population. Instructed in the application and use of selected counselling techniques drawn from leading theoretical models, participants are geared to provide the kinds of therapeutic interventions that will help to create the “ideal” Caribbean person as defined in the CARICOM/HFLE proposal. Key characteristics of this ideal Caribbean person is the individual who takes advantage of opportunities to control, improve, maintain and promote physical, mental, social and spiritual well-being and contributes to the health and welfare of the community and country.

The impetus to develop this programme emerged from the needs assessment and programme evaluations that the UWI, Mona conducted through consultations with several Governmental and Non Governmental agencies as well as the UWI Schools of Continuing Studies and prospective participants throughout the English-speaking Caribbean during the mid 1990s. Internally, the UWI sought to upgrade its training efforts from short term professional in-service counselling programmes to a fully accredited Masters programme to address, more effectively the human resource constraints of the region.

The MSc Counselling Programme is a three year part-time taught masters programme offered by the Advanced Training and Research in Fertility Management Unit, located in

the Faculty of Medical Sciences, The University of the West Indies, Mona. The first of its kind in the University, the programme started with a total of ninety-eight students in nine Caribbean countries and produced sixty-five graduates in 2005. It is currently in the first year of its second cycle with a cohort of seventy students. The programme reach has extended to the Caribbean countries of Antigua, Bahamas, Barbados, Belize, the British Virgin Islands, Cayman Islands, Dominica, Jamaica, St. Lucia, St. Vincent and Trinidad, representing almost seventy-five percent of the countries contributing to the UWI.

The MSc. Counselling Programme

The overall programme objective is to develop a cadre of highly trained and qualified counsellors who are able to adapt predominantly European and North American counselling models to the West Indian context. The basic entry requirement is a first degree and strong interest in counselling supported by creditable character references. In order to achieve the fifty-seven programme credits, each student is required to successfully complete a minimum of nineteen courses including a final research project along with two hundred and fifty hours of practice with real clients in selected agencies plus thirty hours of personal therapy with a trained therapist.

The programme is multimodal in its delivery utilising a variety of didactic and practical methods. These include teaching via teleconferences, face to face tutorials, audio and video cassette tapes, CD ROMs, print, counselling laboratories and practica as well as personal and group therapy. Classes are held on Thursdays and a four-week summer programme is held during the third semesters of the first and second years of the programme.

Programme financing

The initiative of the MSc. Counselling Programme is congruent with the UWI's strategic plan to encourage income generation and increased access to higher education in the region. Developed to be self-financing with fee payment being its source of income, the programme is expected to contribute towards strengthening the economic viability of the institution.

Matrix of collaborative relationships

The matrix at Table 1 identifies four distinct levels of collaborative relationships that exist between the UWI and its stakeholders. These are institutional, national, regional, and extra-regional which influence the key programme variables, namely, design and development, process and outcome with varying degrees of intensity. This implies that whereas some stakeholders may provide more appreciable input in programme design, they may have very little to do with the actual process and vice versa. Some stakeholders' influence may be limited to one variable while others may influence several variables. All stakeholders are mutual partners who determine the extent to which the programme achieves its developmental objective, mainly, that the graduates help to fill existing resource gaps. This all depends on whether these relationships serve as enabling factors that benefit the programme on the one hand or hindering factors that put the programme at risk on the other hand.

Beginning at the institutional level, it is evident from the matrix that the programme is very dependent on a varied network of intra-institutional collaboration and an effective harnessing of these stakeholder resources is needed to ensure a smooth flow of operations. This smooth flow is the main contributor to a successful final programme outcome that is - an optimum number of trained professional graduate counsellors in the Caribbean. All the relationships identified in the matrix, starting from interactions with the Medical Faculty and other faculties through to the Resident Tutors and Schools of Continuing Studies, are critical to the internal operation of the programme. Embedded in this structure are

bureaucratic networks with administrative and academic boards, registry and other administrative offices that control the decision-making for critical programme functions. Serving as enabling mechanisms, these relationships provide very strong programme support and a secure institutional framework in which the programme can operate based on acceptable standards and procedures. They facilitate the sharing of vision, information and resources, allowing for an integrative approach to be taken towards programme design and delivery. They also allow stakeholders to assume mutual accountability for programme outcome.

On the other hand, the UWI's institutional bureaucracy is a threat to the programme's developmental potential. Response time to the needs of programme clients can be greatly delayed and this results in dissatisfied clients with the attendant possibility of losing those clients. These situations present programme organisers with the untidy option of trying to find ways and means of by-passing bureaucratic structures in order to satisfy clients. However, attempts to by-pass the rigid structures could backfire and result in a negative programme evaluation.

A further constraint, especially during the first programme cycle, was that the systems within the University were not fully prepared to respond to the demands of a new graduate level distance programme. At the departmental level, although the ATRFMU was accustomed to delivering in-service training courses to professionals across the Caribbean, it did not have the experience in dealing with a Masters level programme. Additionally, given that there were no antecedents for such a programme by distance at Mona, certain areas of weakness in the collaborative networks could not be anticipated. Consequently, the institutional collaborative partners were not fully cognisant of the scope of their role in the programme. Some were unaware of the volume of work involved and were therefore not always equipped with the necessary resources to effectively address programme needs. As a result, the programme experienced roadblocks and uneven progress in key administrative areas such as, for example, application processing, student registration, mechanisms for fee payment and financial clearance.

In terms of the national and regional levels of collaboration, there are obvious overlaps in the influence of the stakeholders on identical programme variables. For example, collaboration with Governmental and Non Governmental Organisations in Jamaica and the rest of the region, has been useful for providing access to participants, arranging for practicum placement and supervision, identifying local tutors and group therapy facilitators, as well as course writers and lecturers. However, in some territories programme support can be affected by changes in Government Administration. This happens because systems are not formalised and as a consequence, changes in Government administration negatively impacts on the programme. This has affected the number of students who have been able to enter and continue the programme, particularly because of the requirement for a day release throughout the programme.

With respect to extra-regional collaboration, the programme benefits from similar distance counselling programmes were limited. The primary reason is that tertiary level institutions offering this programme are few and are found mainly in Canada and South Africa. Furthermore, accreditation information was available from professional bodies such as the British Counselling Association and the American Psychological Association but they were not open to providing actual accreditation for Caribbean programmes offered outside their colonies or Puerto Rico.

Through these four levels of collaboration, the UWI has sought to diversify its educational product by embracing distance education as a means of extending its reach in the region. To maximise the benefits of this effort, greater integration, commitment and harmonization of

procedures will be required within and among the four levels.

Table 1: MATRIX OF COLLABORATIVE RELATIONSHIPS

Type of Collaboration	Collaborating Partners	Area of Influence	Collaborative Activities	Outcome
<p>INSTITUTIONAL</p> <p>These relationships are established with different faculties and administrative offices within the UWI as a whole.</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Medical Faculty & other faculties • UWIDEC • The various administrative offices (Graduate Studies and Research, Office of Finance, Human Resource Development, Student Services, the Bursary, Office of Administration, Examinations, Students' Records and the Legal Unit). • Distance education Site Coordinators in the campus countries • Resident Tutors and Schools of Continuing Studies in the Caribbean Group of Twelve. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Design and development • Recruitment and admissions • Delivery • Assessment and awards 	<p>Consultations for</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Curriculum development - Course writing - Materials production - Applications processing - Provision of transcripts - Student registration - Withdrawals & deferrals - Copyright permission - Legal contracts - Financial clearance - Instruction & supervision - Internal examinations - Graduation & certification - Travel & transportation - Accommodation - I T support 	<p>This level of networking has implications for the core operations of the programme. The pace at which information flows at this level is of key importance in how the programme is deemed to be efficient. Poor decisions at this level have serious implications for the quality of programme delivery and outcome</p>
<p>NATIONAL</p> <p>These relationships are established at the national level but overlap with regional links.</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Government agencies • Non-governmental organisations • Other educational institutions 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Design and development • Recruitment and admissions • Delivery • Assessment and awards 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Needs assessment - Evaluation activities - Day releases and leave of absences - Scholarships 	<p>Networking with these agencies serves to inform the feasibility of programme delivery and</p>

	<p>external to the UWI</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • The private sector 		<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Practicum placement - Personal therapy - Teaching & supervision 	ultimately determines the quality of output.
<p>REGIONAL</p> <p>Those set of relationships that the UWI has forged within the region</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Government agencies in the Anglophone Caribbean such as Ministries of Health, Education, Social Services and Community Development • Non-governmental organisations • Other UWI campuses – Cave Hill & St. Augustine • Schools of continuing studies in the Group of Twelve Countries • Professional Counselling Agencies • Caribbean Publishing Houses 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Design and development • Recruitment and admissions • Delivery • Assessment and awards 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Needs assessment - Evaluation activities - Negotiation of day releases and leave of absences - Scholarships - Practicum placement - Personal therapy - Teaching & supervision - Copyright permission 	It is through collaboration with these entities that mechanisms are put in place for student access, recruitment and retention in the programme.
<p>EXTRA-REGIONAL</p> <p>Those set of relationships that are external to the region</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • The British Counselling Association • The Open University Worldwide • The British Psychological Association • American Psychological Association • Educational institutions outside of the region • International Publishing Houses 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Design and development • Recruitment and admissions • Delivery • Assessment and awards 	<p>Consultations for</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Curriculum development - Course writing - Provision of transcripts - Copyright permission - External examinations 	These collaborative links provide quality assurance for programme content in relation to theoretical and practical programme outcomes.

Lessons learnt and the way forward

Collaborative relationships in the MSc. Counselling Programme are useful whenever they are effectively coordinated to ensure the efficiency and subsequent cost-effectiveness of programme operations. However, if they are not carefully harnessed, they can prove to be dysfunctional and hinder progress.

Programme participants should be viewed as programme partners and encouraged through the use of available technology to engage in more student centred learning activities.

Even though the UWI is playing an integral part in the region's development through higher education, its developmental mandate cannot be fully realised unless it carefully assesses the dynamics of its collaborative relationships with a view to increasing the efficiency of its operations which are at times negatively affected by these very relationships especially at the institutional level.

Given the constraints of Caribbean countries, it is imperative that the UWI assumes a posture that recognises competitiveness and seeks to develop mutually beneficial linkages that will strengthen its position, promote cooperation and create institutional mergers that will make the educational product more widely accessible.

To increase efficiency and effectiveness, the UWI needs to address the rigidity of its bureaucratic system that hits directly at programme operations. Additionally, the programme organisers should be allowed some autonomy to develop responses to resolve bureaucratic challenges which place the programme at risk. The UWI also needs to increase its promotional activities with regional stakeholders to deepen their interest in and commitment to the programme both formally and informally.

Given the limited resources, physical dispersion and globalisation that affect the region, distance education will, of necessity, be the way forward for higher education. The UWI will be pressed to fully engage its partners to address challenges and barriers to make higher education widely accessible in the region to significantly expand its human capital.

Endnote

1 Compared to a higher education enrolment of 51% in the Organisation for Economic Cooperation and Development countries, the Caribbean is grouped among low income countries which have an average of only 6% enrolment.

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