

2018

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Adusei-Asante, K., Doh, D., & Awidi, I. (2018). Educational partnership in action: Insights from Western Australia. In *Proceedings of the Stars 2018 Conference*

<https://unistars.org/papers/STARS2018/11E.pdf>

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Educational partnership in action: Insights from Western Australia

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Abstract

Governments and educational institutions are increasingly recognising the importance of collaboration and partnerships with stakeholders in achieving good educational outcomes for students and communities. In Australia, the need for such partnerships influenced the establishment of the Higher Education Participation and Partnerships Program in 2003 to ensure that Australians from low socio-economic status backgrounds who can study at university can access the opportunity. In this paper, we discuss the positive outcomes of a partnership arrangement between Edith Cowan University and the Organisation of African Communities of Western Australia on an educational outreach programme to inspire African communities in Perth to pursue higher education.

Introduction

Governments and educational institutions are increasingly recognising the importance of collaboration and partnerships with stakeholders in achieving good educational outcomes for students and communities. As a result, the Australian Government established the Higher Education Participation and Partnerships Program (HEPPP) in 2003 to ensure that Australians from low socio-economic status (SES) backgrounds who have the desire and capability to study at university are not denied access to higher education. Through the HEPPP initiative, the government funds universities to execute programmes that improve access to undergraduate courses for people from low SES backgrounds, while improving their retention and completion rates. The funding is based on a formula that considers the number of students from low SES backgrounds enrolled at those institutions (Government of Australia, n.d.).

The HEPPP initiative is founded on two key concepts: participation and partnerships. The partnerships component requires eligible universities to implement programmes that inspire and build the capacity of people from low SES backgrounds to participate in higher education through effective educational outreach activities involving partnerships with schools, colleges, community groups and other stakeholders (Government of Australia, n.d.). A recent report evaluating the HEPPP between 2010 and 2014 found that the partnership component of the programme accounted for 30% of funding allocated to eligible universities (Acil Allen Consulting, 2017). The report also revealed that although the partnerships component was an important aspect of HEPPP, some universities were using the funds to promote their institutions or recruit students, although the evidence for this claim was inadequate (Acil Allen Consulting, 2017). As the entire HEPPP is currently being reviewed, lessons learned from institutions that have implemented HEPPP-funded initiatives are critical and timely. This paper provides a reflection of our experiences with Top Up, a HEPPP-funded educational outreach programme at Edith Cowan University (ECU). The paper provides insights into how a partnership arrangement with the Organisation of African Communities of Western Australia (OAC-WA) on an educational outreach programme to inspire African communities in Perth yielded positive outcomes for the participants.

How partnerships and collaborations can help educational programmes

In a competitive global environment for education, partnerships and collaborative efforts are emerging as critical components of managing educational programmes and institutions. Partnerships for educational programmes involve drawing synergies from resources, personnel, structures and systems to improve teaching and learning, and the overall outcomes of education. Partnerships for education occur across educational institutions, countries, cultures and other organisations and at different levels. There are various ways through which partnerships and collaborations can help

educational programmes, some of which are discussed in this review. According to Robertson (2016), one of the critical roles of partnership for education is leadership capacity building, which can be achieved through leadership coaching. Through partnership, educational institutions with higher skillsets can provide coaching services and training to less skilled and experienced colleagues. Such continuous professional development training through partnerships has implications for the quality of teaching and learning, which Cardno (2005) referred to as the quiet revolution in modern education management. An example of the effects of a partnership programme for educational leadership and management was the Maori Success Initiative (MSI) in Aotearoa, New Zealand (Santamaría, Webber, Santamaría, & Dam, 2015).

Barnett, Hall, Berg and Camarena (2014) noted that, in the past, partnerships between industry and educational institutions played a significant role in transforming the way teaching and learning were organised. The authors added that while industry and business provided huge financial resources and donations to support the development of new programmes, educational institutions tailored training programmes to suit industry needs. Such collaborations remain relevant in the current competitive global environment. In this way, industry–education partnerships have the potential to transform the nature of educational programmes.

In most parts of the world where school enrolment, attendance and educational attrition present a challenge, one of the ways of addressing such challenges was the creation of education–community partnerships (Aguayo & Eames, 2017; Dreze & Kingdon, 2001; Vlasov & Hujala, 2017). For example, the use of parent–teacher cooperations or associations have significantly improved basic education outcomes in some parts of the world (Ansong, Okumu, Bowen, Walker, & Eisensmith, 2017). In the West African country of Ghana, communities, through their Parent Teacher Associations (PTAs), have provided school buildings and other infrastructure to support education at both the basic and secondary levels (Ansong et al., 2017). In effect, community–education partnerships have implications for motivating parents and children to be active in education. Such partnerships can also result in enhancing the educational infrastructure for teaching and learning (Gyasi, Wang, Owusu-Ampomah, & Kusi, 2017).

Another important area where partnerships can help educational programmes is innovation and technology exchanges (Barnett et al., 2014). Information technology has changed the nature of teaching and learning such that every educational institution must adopt new and innovative ways of doing things to stay relevant (Ramesh & Dibaba, 2017). This can only be achieved through partnership programmes. For example, Aaron, Blackwell and Burnard (2016) asserted that collaborative relationships between teachers and computer scientists are required for developing creative pedagogies for learning computer programming in schools. There are several other ways through which educational institutions can partner with information technology organisations to improve teaching and learning.

The benefit in promoting such collaborative partnerships is in the fact that achievement of a more equitable society is largely dependent on making participation in higher education broader to include students who are disadvantaged, with support from government and universities. Reading (2016) noted that widening higher education participation is one of the key priorities for government and universities and associated national and individual economic wellbeing to improvement of educational level and skills of the population. Horwitz and Snipes (2008) also observed that economic security is determined by academic skills and educational attainment.

For most migrant students, particularly from Africa, the transition between high school and tertiary education is a challenge, with most dropping out. The majority of those who make it to university fall through the cracks before their second or final year (Gately, Ellis, Britton, & Fleming, 2017). This may be attributed to their inability to deal with the core challenges of negotiating academic activities without adequate support that takes into consideration their linguistic and cultural backgrounds. Collaborating with stakeholders therefore provides a platform where effective engagement can be

encouraged, and positive outcomes achieved. Horwitz and Snipes (2008) confirmed this necessity in the case of disadvantaged Latino and Black Americans, where ‘dropouts’ have led to a widening achievement and attainment gap, likely to sustain or exacerbate existing social and economic inequalities. Thus, when universities effectively collaborate with community organisations with a clear understanding of students’ skill support needs, linguistic and cultural challenges, an environment may be created where high school students can effectively discuss and clearly understand higher educational transitional requirements. For a western Sydney university where a strategic initiative to support students from disadvantaged backgrounds was put in place, Reading (2016) showed that the skill support needs of students struggling with academic demands was necessary for a successful outcome.

Horwitz and Snipes (2008) outlined three basic challenges for students who fail to transition to high school—poor academic preparation, weak academic literacy and formidable social and environmental challenges. They observed that universities have not been able to provide high-quality access to the linguistic and cultural support required by these students, leading to disengagement and high dropout rates. Because these students come to university academically unprepared, lacking the foundational knowledge and academic literacy necessary to access higher-level subject matter, a collaborative support is necessary. Horwitz and Snipes (2008) argued for a more challenging curriculum with combined support from a student support network, which they associated with better student outcomes. By working through the support network, students are supported to set academic goals while at the same time working to create support systems.

The Aim Higher Summit

The Aim Higher Summit (AHS) forms part of the Top Up programme, an initiative designed to promote education among African youth and their families in Perth. The AHS is an annual community outreach event that started in 2016. The AHS was initiated as a response to concerns that African high school students in Perth were experiencing difficulties in their academic journeys, felt intimidated, discriminated against and profiled as being unable to achieve highly in education and/or deliberately discouraged from aspiring to higher education after Year 10 (see Adusei-Asante & Awidi, 2017). The AHS offers a platform where matters relating to education in African communities in Perth are discussed. The event brings together successful African professionals in various fields to encourage African young people to participate in higher education and make informed post-secondary choices. At the inaugural event, a panel of eight professionally successful (five women and three men) spoke and answered questions from over 70 participants. While the first edition of the AHS was successful, collaboration with OAC-WA yielded even better outcomes for the second event in 2017.

Outcomes of partnership with the OAC-WA

The OAC-WA is a not-for-profit organisation that provides support, services and representation for all Africans in Western Australia at the state and national levels. The organisation was officially inaugurated in 2014, although it started operating in 2012. The OAC-WA forms part of the Federation of African Communities Councils of Australia (FACCA), the national body representing Africans in Australia. The OAC-WA 1) works with FACCA to advocate for and advance the welfare of African people in WA, 2) provides a platform on which Africans from diverse backgrounds and countries living in WA present issues of concern to the community and work collaboratively to find a lasting solution, 3) advocates on African issues to the WA State Government and other relevant bodies as required, 4) provides information and referral services for Africans in WA and 5) contributes to debates, policy and decision-making processes on African affairs in WA (OAC-WA, 2018).

Following the 2016 AHS event, we determined to partner with community organisations to increase our reach. The Top Up collaboration with the OAC-WA was opportune. The 2017 AHS coincided with the OAC-WA ‘Stop the Violence’ Project (STVP), a six-month training and mentorship programme that builds the capacity of young Africans, their self-esteem and leadership skills (OAC-WA, n.d.). The STVP is focused on identifying what violence is and creating awareness of how to

stop it both within and outside of African communities (OAC-WA, 2018). Part of the requirements for STVP participants involved successfully organising a community event. Having attended the first edition, the leaders of OAC-WA approached ECU for a partnership arrangement to organise the 2017 AHS. Following three rounds of meetings with the OAC-WA an agreement was reached. The AHS became the project of the STVP participants and they managed the 2017 AHS publicity and most aspects of the event. On their part, the OAC-WA used the project to create awareness of the issues facing young Africans in WA, including unemployment, violence and racial profiling. The OAC-WA invited two guest speakers, one from the UK and another from Adelaide, who provided the keynote speeches at the AHS alongside other local speakers. Top Up provided the venue and some funds for the event, while the OAC-WA took care of micro aspects of the AHS including catering, ushering and the entire protocol.

There were three separate sessions: 1) youth session, 2) parents' session and 3) higher education session. The sessions with the young Africans and their parents were separate and concurrent to allow free discussion. The higher education session was run as a plenary. The WA Minister of Multicultural Interests attended the event alongside representatives from the WA Police, Department of Education and local government authorities and took turns to address both the youth and their parents on relevant issues. The youth session discussed mental health and ways to obtain employment opportunities. The parent session discussed cultural understanding, the Australian way of life, mental health and how they can engage their children in conversations on education and their general wellbeing.

The plenary session on education focused on the importance of higher education, university entry pathways and overcoming transitional challenges between high school and university. Three guest speakers joined OAC-WA's two invited speakers to form a panel. The panel took turns to tell their stories about the difference higher education had made in their respective careers and how they overcame transitional challenges, after which they took questions from the audience. It became clear that aside from systemic racist challenges confronting African students in Perth, parents seemed to either lack the interest or the requisite information on how to support their children to transition between high school and university. It also became apparent that some of the young people lacked motivation to attend university because of debt and unemployment after school. The participants were encouraged to approach the OAC-WA for support when in doubt and take advantage of ECU's Top Up programme and the OAC-WA's 'Make it Happen' initiative for mentoring African high school students in years 10–12.

The effect of the partnership with OAC-WA was palpable. An improved attendance of 127 was recorded at the 2017 AHS, higher than for 2016. An African academic from ECU discussed general university pathways. The session also provided an opportunity for young Africans and their parents to ask questions about various subjects and professions and their entry requirements. The event was covered by a local television station and their post-event interviews showed that the participants received important information on higher education. From an event organisation perspective, the partnership with the OAC-WA reduced the stress we encountered during the 2016 AHS. The collaboration also resulted in networks being established for the participants, while it portrayed a sense of unity in the African communities in Perth. Following the event, the Top Up team met with the OAC-WA leadership to review the event and ways to improve the 2018 edition.

Conclusion

This paper discussed the outcomes of a collaboration arrangement between ECU and OAC-WA on an educational outreach programme to inspire African communities in Perth to pursue higher education. The Australian Government's HEPPP recognises the need for educational institutions to partner with communities to design and implement educational projects to support people from low SES backgrounds access and succeed in higher education. Our collaboration with OAC-WA in 2017 to organise an outreach program yielded positive outcomes. These included improved attendance and insights on the importance of higher education and overcoming transitional challenges between high

school and tertiary education, including but not limited to accessing mentoring programmes offered by OAC-WA and ECU for African communities.

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