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Enhancing the Quality and Relevance of Teaching and Learning through University Community Partnerships: the Case of Art at Makerere University

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Abstract. A key gap in writing on the University Community Partnership (UCP) approach to higher education delivery relates to the fact that, in general, the fruitfulness of the approach is taken for granted. Furthermore, the usefulness of UCPs is tacitly expected to be two-way with universities *helping* their communities to address some of their challenges and the experience of partnership helping the universities to enhance their *relevance*. However, this paper reports the findings of a study that presents a different picture. Investigating the implementation and impact of the UCP approach to the delivery of the Bachelor of Industrial and Fine Arts program at Makerere University's Margaret Trowel School of Industrial and Fine Arts (MTSIFA), the study found that contrary to the widely held view that the approach to higher education delivery results into universities *helping* their communities to deal with some of their challenges, at the MTSIFA, the approach has not resulted into service learning. However, it has helped the school to close critical gaps in studio support for its students, thereby enhancing the quality and relevance of teaching and learning. Therefore, using this case, the study argues that UCPs present a panacea to some of the resources constraints inherent to massification that many HEIs in Africa are grappling with.

Keywords: UCP; Art education; Curriculum Innovation.

1   Introduction

In many parts of the world, university-community partnerships (UCPs) are gaining momentum as strategies for enhancing positive change (CCPH, 2007; Rubin, 2007). Although they could take many forms, UCPs are characterized by active involvement with issues, problems and constituencies outside the university in ways that foster the intellectual life of the university. They are beneficial in a way that they take the university to the community and the

community to the university. UCPs result into improvements in the relevance of universities' teaching, research and community engagement programs (Buys & Bursnall, 2007) as well as in the rating of the universities' quality. According to Benson, Harkavy & Puckett (2000), UCP is a particularly useful approach for improving scholarship and communities and for forging democratic, mutually beneficial, and mutually respectful university-community relationships.

As more UCPs have developed, a small but rapidly growing body of literature about the partnerships has emerged (Rubin, 2007). Nevertheless, review of this literature shows that majority of the authors on the subject focus on the promise rather than outcomes of the UCP approach to higher education delivery. A key gap in writing on the subject relates to the fact that in general, the fruitfulness of the approach is taken for granted despite the fact that putting UCPs into practice can present significant challenges, leading to disparities between expectations and experiences (cf. El Ansari, Phillips & Zwi, 2002; Vidal et al., 2002). Furthermore, the usefulness of UCPs is tacitly expected to be twofold: universities *helping* their communities to address some of their challenges and the experience of partnership helping the universities to enhance the relevance of their teaching and research programs to their communities' needs.

This paper reports the findings of a recent study that presents a different picture. Investigating the implementation and impact of the UCP approach to the delivery of the Bachelor of Industrial and Fine Arts (BIFA) program at Makerere University's Margaret Trowel School of Industrial and Fine Arts (MTSIFA), the study found that contrary to the widely held view that the UCP approach to higher education delivery results into universities *helping* their communities to deal with some of their challenges, at the MTSIFA, the approach has not resulted into significant benefits for the community. However, it has helped the school to close critical gaps in studio support for its students, thereby enhancing the quality of teaching and learning. Therefore, using this case, the study argues that UCPs present a panacea to some of the resources constraints inherent to massification that many HEIs on the continent are grappling with.

2   Makerere University and the UCP approach at MTSIFA

Makerere University, Uganda's flagship higher education institution (Lejeune, 1999), was established in 1922 as a technical college, by the British colonial administration in East Africa. The main aims of establishing the institution were to: 1) provide leavers of secondary education with higher education—so that they do not seek it outside Africa (where they could copy political independence activism), and 2) produce manpower for positions in the colonial administration (Ssekamwa, 1997; Tiberondwa, 1998). Sicherman (2006) aptly divides the

development of the University from 1922 to 2000 into five periods: 1) Formative years (1922 – 1949); Glory years (1950 – 1971); Crisis years (1971 – 1986); and Reform years (1987 – 1999).

The formative years were characterized by the conception and development of Makerere College as a regional institution of higher education serving the east and central African region. During the period, as well as in the 1950s, the college developed in line with the strategy of the British colonial administration in the region, which revolved around the idea of producing a class of gentry that would support the colonial administration without challenging its mandate (Tiberondwa, 1998). Guidance in the University's development was provided by various education commissions (e.g. the Phelps Stokes Commission [1925], Binns Commission [1951] and de Bunsen Education Committee [1953]). The college was structurally and culturally modelled along Oxbridge and, indeed, became an affiliate of the University of London in the early 1940s because the goal was to produce a class of "Europeanized Africans" that would not only aspire to European ways of life but also promote the colonialist agenda in the region (Ssekamwa, 1999). The universities that played a fundamental role in shaping the growth and development of Makerere did not at the time appreciate UCP as a vital component that would be required to shape instructional culture.

Like similar institutions (e.g. Ibadan [1948]), therefore, Makerere had little consideration for its African location (cf. Todaro, 1998; Mamdani, 2007; Mazrui, 1994). All of its students were sponsored by the government and courses of study were offered in a few areas, primarily targeted at meeting the human resource needs in the government's service. The college tended to be elitist—analogously removed from its immediate community as an ivory tower—and produced a class of 'Europeanised Africans', who shunned the traditional means of livelihood, since they perceived themselves as being superior to their less educated (Ssekamwa, 1997; Tiberondwa, 1998). In view of the superiority tendencies, the educated blacks who at the time were the administrators of the university did not feel inclined to adopting any strategies that would make them work closer to the African communities because they aspired to be superior. Notwithstanding, Makerere University developed into an institution of notable repute and was famed as a centre of international excellence that was analogously referred to as the 'Harvard of Africa' during its glory years (see, for example, Altbach, 2005; Nakanyike & Nansozi, 2003; Sicherman, 2006; Eisemon and Salmi, 1993).

However, the period 1971-1986 was a time of great retrogression. At Makerere, resources to support teaching and learning were acutely constrained and academic staff fled to other countries. Collaboration with other institutions of learning was cut off and international bodies such as the Commonwealth and UNESCO excommunicated Uganda. Since these bodies contributed significant funds to facilitate teaching and research these essential university activities deteriorated. The University was grossly underfunded—due to the country's

economic downturn and subsequent adoption of IMF/World Bank structural adjustment programs that *discouraged* government spending on higher education (Mamdani, 2007). According to Mayanja (1996), and other scholars like Kassam (1999); Mamdani (2007); Sicherman (2007) and Nakanyike & Nansozi (2000), this affected the University's potential for quality assurance.

At the MTSIFA, this turbulent period created scarcity of imported art materials and artists were forced to improvise using locally available materials. Interestingly, this engagement with local resources allowed for closer contact between MTSIFA and her community. The need for the students to relate with the community in order to learn from and share experiences during the turbulent times was clearer and evidence of this is seen through the paintings and other art pieces made at the school during that time.

During the late 1980s, the university came up with the private sponsorship scheme from 1987-1996 through which it hoped to give more opportunities to students to enrol in the university as well as provide avenues through which money would be generated to sustain the university (Mayanja, 1996). This improved the University's funding situation, thereby enabling refurbishment of some physical structures and upward revision of staffs' emoluments. It also narrowed the university education demand-supply gap in the country from 22% eligible applicants in 1986 to 46% in 2005 while accelerating curriculum innovation, as departments devised study programs for the *new* (fee-paying) students (Altbach, 2005; Byaruhanga, 2002; Mayanja, 1996). Since the mid-1990s, therefore, the expansion of student intake at the University has been credited for contributing to the reformation of the University (see, for example, Court, 1999; Kassam, 1999).

However, the expansion in student enrolment resulted in several constraints on the University's capacity to deliver quality higher education because expansion in support resources did not keep pace with expansion in the number of students admitted. Indeed, the years succeeding the reform years (2000 to 2006) were characterised by several dilemmas (see, for example, Mamdani, 2007). Besides, dysfunctional curricula practices resulted into production of ill-prepared graduates that lacked the competences required to deal with the challenges of the contemporary employment world.

Indeed, scholars like Mayanja (2002) report soaring unemployment rates among the university's graduates. Ironically, there were also reports that upcoming industries and cottages in the country could not find the skills they required. This concomitance of unemployed graduates and unfilled vacancies in the economy pointed to incongruence between the skills that the university provided and contemporary labour market needs. This incongruence formed part of the basis for the adoption of the UCP approach to the delivery of the university's programs in its strategic plan for the period 2008-2018. At the end

of the strategic planning period, this study delved into the impact that the UCP approach has had on the growth and development of art education at the school.

3   Methodology

Data was collected between 2015 and 2016 from BIFA students, lecturers on the BIFA program and representatives of the Art organisations in the community that hosted the BIFA students. This was done using questionnaire, interviews and photographic interpretation. The data was analysed using descriptive statistics and content analysis.

4   Findings and Discussion

The impact of implementation of UCP in the delivery of the BIFA program was looked at in terms of how adoption of the approach has influenced students' learning and lecturers' teaching, research and community service. It was also looked at in terms of the benefits that have accrued to MTSIFA as an institution as well as those that have accrued to the community.

4.1   Impact of UCP Approach on Students' Learning

The impact of the UCP approach on students' learning was looked at in terms of the domains of student competence that the BIFA program undertakes to build. According to the BIFA program handbook (2012), these domains are: 1) ability to create, perform and participate in the arts; 2) knowledge and utilization of art materials and resources; 3) ability to respond to and analyse works of art; and 4) ability to appreciate the cultural dimensions and contribution of the arts. The students that participated in the study were asked to specify the extent to which they would agree that delivery of the BIFA program using the UCP approach, notably their attachment to relevant organisations in the community, has improved these features of their learning. In response, majority of the students either "Agreed" or "Strongly Agreed" that adoption of the UCP approach has improved all the four elements of their learning.

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Table 1: Distribution of Students by Level of Agreement that UCP Improved their Competence (%, n=87)

Variable	AS	A	D	DS	Total
Ability to create, perform and participate in the arts	30	63	7	0	100
Knowledge and utilization of art materials and resources	38	54	3	5	100
Ability to respond to and analyse works of art	57	43	0	0	100
Ability to appreciate the cultural dimensions and contribution of the arts	32	39	29	0	100

Key: AS=Agree Strongly; A=Agree; D=Disagree; DS=Disagree Strongly

The results in Table 1 show that majority of the students either "Agreed" or "Strongly Agreed" that adoption of the UCP approach has improved all the four elements of their learning.

At three community organisations visited, all students completed two months long projects that were closely linked to organisation goals and explicitly focused on skills needed for effective product development such as problem analysis and collaborative problem solving. For example, at the first organisation, students were expected to carry out a concept testing of some of their new ideas. Students were expected to work in groups to establish whether the product would be understood or needed by the consumers. Students were taught how to develop action plans aimed at product awareness and improvement among the customers. Students worked together to implement these action plans and therefore got exposure to potential consumers and employers.

At the second organisation, the students took to development of corporate identity for consumer organisations. They were trained about the development of organisational persona through branding. One team of students at this organisation sought to improve the corporate identity of an organisation through signage. After conducting research, the students developed a proposal for promotional activities that would shape the transition period towards unveiling of the new organisation brand. The students were also exposed to ultramodern machinery and inputs (cf. Plate 1).

Plate 1: Ultramodern textile machinery intern BIFA students were exposed to at a textiles company

Plate 2: Textile machinery BIFA students use at the MTSIFA.

It is particularly noteworthy that the machinery shown in Plate 2 are a sharp contrast from the machinery and materials available at the MTSIFA. A key conclusion deducible from the foregoing findings is that the UCP approach

towards the delivery of the BIFA program has enabled the MTSIFA to close critical gaps in the latter's facilitation, to the benefit of the students' learning and exposure. As a consequence of consistent underfunding over the last four decades, facilitation of the MTSIFA is grossly inadequate, so the school run a risk of turning out graduates albeit who are not grounded in contemporary and emerging technologies of production of art. However, the findings of this study show that adoption of the UCP approach has provided a handy way out of some of the bottlenecks in the facilitation of the school.

At the textile industry students were taught the treatment of raw materials, i.e. the preparation or production of various textiles fibers, and the manufacture of yarns (e.g. through spinning). Students were additionally taught how to improve fabrics visually, physically and aesthetically--and to include properties which consumers demanded such as bleaching, printing, dyeing, impregnating, coating, and plasticizing.

However, in a comparative sense, the percentage of students expressing "Disagreement" with the statement that the UCP approach has improved their ability to appreciate the cultural dimensions and contribution of the arts was relatively higher (Table 1). All the students affirmed that delivery of the BIFA program following the approach did not constrain them in any way. This suggests that, from the students' point of view, the approach did not affect the delivery of the program in any way but rather that it positively influenced their perception about the production process of visual arts. This was corroborated by the data elicited from the lecturers and key informants interviewed.

Additionally the data in the students' questionnaires showed that 88% of the students felt that they agreed or strongly agreed that they had real responsibilities assigned to them at the different field attachment placement and 77% agreed or strongly agreed that they were allowed to make important decisions during the production process. Some of the photographic evidence collected corroborates this view. For example, the pictures in Plate 3 show that graphic design students working with an advertising company had the experience of working on street billboards that they otherwise would not have obtained from the MTSIFA since the school is not into street advertising much as the students need that experience to augment their study of graphic design.

Plate 3: BIFA students erecting a street billboard in Kampala under the auspices of an advertising company

Most of the students also felt that they agreed or strongly agreed that they had freedom to develop and use their own artistic ideas at the various organisations (64%), agreed or strongly agreed that they were allowed to perform tasks by themselves rather than observe the organisation processes (66%), and felt that they made a contribution to the production process within those organisation (55%). Up to 79% agreed or strongly agreed that they had challenges accomplishing the tasks that they were assigned. While about 02% felt that they had the opportunity to discuss their field work experiences with their lecturers after returning to the Art School, 82% of the students felt that their work was not appreciated by the supervisors within the organisation. The latter indicators showed the degree to which students felt undervalued by both their field supervisors and lecturers. Although this data show laxity on part of MTSIFA lecturers, it interestingly reveals that about two thirds of the students benefited from their participation in UCP activities (field attachment) at MTSIFA. Indeed, comparative analysis of the students' performance before and after adoption of the UCP approach shows improvements in performance after adoption of the approach (Table 2).

Table 2: Students' Performance before and after Adoption of the UCP Approach

SN	Specialization	Mean Score		
		2007	2013	Difference
1	History of Art	7	8	1
2	Graphics	12	14	2
3	Ceramics	6	7	1
4	Painting	26	30	4
5	Photography	12	14	2
6	Fashion design	14	16	2
7	Sculpture	3	3	0
8	Illustration	7	8	1

4.2 Impact of UCP Approach on Teaching and Research

Questionnaires were administered to lecturers to ascertain the impact of UCP approach on teaching and research. They were asked to establish whether: the delivery of the BIFA program using the UCP approach has improved the delivery of the program; the delivery of the BIFA program using the UCP approach has constrained the delivery of the program; the delivery of the BIFA program using the UCP approach has improved their teaching effectiveness?

With exception of one, all the lecturers indicated that delivery of the BIFA program using the UCP approach has improved the program. Table 3 shows the ways in which delivery of the program using the approach has enhanced the program.

Table 3: Lecturers' views on the Impact of UCP on the Delivery of the BIFA Program

In your view, how has the UCP approach impacted on the BIFA program?
Students are [now] able to explore various techniques and styles on the [art] market
Students have gained confidence in working with customers
Students have got the opportunity to use modern equipment in the community organisations
MTSIFA products have been able to receive critique
Opportunity to expose their work to potential clients
Students gain real life experience
Students get opportunity for value addition
Students get exposed to current market trends
Students work much faster, producing more work
Students get a touch of practitioners
Students learn the level of precision required in the field

The findings in Table 3 show that the lecturers felt that the UCP approach has impacted on the BIFA program in two main ways. First, they suggest that the approach has exposed the BIFA students to the world of work—through giving the students an experience with practicing artists and exposing them to contemporary market trends and needs (Plate 4).

Plate 4: Contemporary garment trends fabric and textile intern students were exposed to at a garment company

Second, the findings show that the UCP approach is exposing the BIFA program to critique from the community, which could improve the program's external efficiency. During the interview held with him, the Principal of the CEDAT explained that the UCP approach markets MTSIFA, adding that, arising out of adoption of the approach, alumni of the school achieve placement in prestigious art and design related companies and that it has enabled MTSIFA lecturers to build solid professional research networks.

4.3   Impact of UCP Approach on Community Organisations

The respondents from art-related organisations were asked to describe how their partnership with MTSIFA (and how hosting of BIFA students in particular) has impacted their work. The goal of this question was to try to understand the impact of their involvement in the delivery of the BIFA program on their professional skills (i.e. service learning), capacity to address their own needs; and influence on the school's teaching and research programs. Their main responses to the question are cited below;

> Working with [MTSIFA] students is interesting in a number of ways. For one, they are ambitious and energetic—always eager to come up with something new. They are savvy about emerging technologies and fashions. Quite ironically, they tend to be very hardworking and excited [about their work]. (Interview with respondent from an art organisation in the community).

> The students add something to our work as a company…so I would say that partnership with the university has helped us…when you have large orders and students are around, they really help you [to deliver on the big orders]— Interview with respondent from an art organisation in the community.

> I would say the benefits of UCP are two-way. You have students with plenty of theoretical knowledge…then you also have experienced artisans that may not have been to formal Art Schools. I realize that they complement each other's strengths. (Interview with respondent from an art organisation in the community).

> The students use their time here [in the art company] to get exposed to emerging technologies and machines. Some of these [emerging technologies and machines] may be things they have seen and used in the university while others may be new to them. There are things you don't find at Makerere but which the students need to be exposed to. (Interview with respondent from an art organisation in the community).

The foregoing citations from representatives of art-related organisations in the community and plates show two things that are relevant to the study of the impact of the UCP approach on the community. First, they show that both the students and art organisations benefit from the students' internship experience. As the students gain exposure on one hand, the organisations hosting them benefit from the students' skills and labour. However, the second insight discernible from the citations and plates is that the impact of the students' engagement with the art-related organisations is not in the areas of service learning and enhancement of the organisations' capacity to address their needs and to influence the BIFA program and MTSIFA. The responses do not make any indication that engaging with the students has enabled the organisations to influence the BIFA program and MTSIFA in any explicit way. Accordingly, the findings of the study suggest that, at MTSIFA, the conceptual relationship between implementation of UCP and community involvement in higher education programs has not been realized.

4.4   Conclusion

The UCP approach to the delivery of the BIFA program at Makerere University has exposed the students to the world of work—through giving them an experience with practicing artists and exposing them to contemporary market trends and needs. Second, the findings show that the UCP approach is exposing the BIFA program to critique from the community, which could improve the program's external efficiency. More importantly, however, the approach has enabled students to access facilities and training experiences that the MTSIFA is unable to offer due to its resource constraints. However, the UCP approach has not facilitated service learning. Clearly, the art organizations that hosted the BIFA students did not learn from the students and their professors. Beyond the MTSIFA and Makerere University, this study has implications for similar higher education institutions on the continent. It demonstrates that UCPs present a way through which the institutions could augment their increasingly constrained facilities. The significance of this recommendation derives from the fact that funding for higher education institutions across the continent is reducing whilst enrolments are expanding and some actors in the administration of these institutions are reluctant to embrace partnership with the community.

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