

Video- Conferencing for Outreach Communication Strategy to Enhance Academic Publishing and Research Communication in Africa

Wilson OKOKA¹, Irene Judith NAGASHA²

*Kyambogo University, Faculty of Education,
P.O.Box 1, Kyambogo, Kampala, (Uganda)*

¹Telephone: +256782588846. Email: nupap2000@yahoo.com

²Telephone: +25678231113. Email: judith.nagasha@gmail.com

Abstract

The paper presents the effectiveness of video-conferencing community outreach projects in enhancing research ethics communication for public awareness in Uganda. It sets out to establish how vital the practice of research ethics in cross-cultural environment was in enhancing the smooth tripartite interactions among the researchers, communities and host institutions. The objectives were to: get an overview of community outreach research ethical issues and communication strategies; establish researchers' outreach methods (approaches); identify the ethical challenges facing inter-cultural research in the country; assess the key enablers of community research ethics; and discover creative methods of infusing ethics in a cross-cultural community research. This review was conducted by sourcing documents, current literature and news bulletins, online search engines, through discussion with key informants, documents from Ugandan government specifically the ministries or national as well as international bodies, and lessons learned from research ethical practice. The findings were generally disappointing, contrary to the widely issued guidelines. There are rampant unresolved ethical issues that are worsened by communication gaps; field ethical challenges include: wrong attitudes, behaviour, methodology, perceptions, communication strategies, and cultural illiteracy; commonalities of outreach themes, agreements, modalities, methods, target communities, networks, and funding sources; many absentee field researchers and fictitious research sites; and weak ethics culture. Ethical issues are prompted by flouting guidelines, weak or lack of capacity, experience, integrity, professionalism, communication skills, or ignorance. There are multiple gaps in university coordination, concepts, methods, planning, budgeting, and implementation leading to project failures, budget overruns, conflicts, and disincentives. Community participation ensures trust, effective communication, and social acceptance. Inter-cultural community involvement promotes ethical research good practice among the researchers themselves on one hand, and the inter-cultural demographics plus the host institutions, on the other. Outreaches are critical for achieving early adoption and widespread diffusion of research ethics and culture in communities. They should be well planned, implemented, monitored, and evaluated for enhanced participation, transparency, empowerment, mutual trust, sustainability, and gender equality to achieve SDGs in Uganda.

Keywords: NRENS, video-conferencing, outreach communication, research communication, gender equality

1. Introduction

The paper presents the effectiveness of video-conferencing community outreach projects in enhancing research ethics communication for public awareness in Uganda. It set out to establish how vital the practice of research ethics in a cross-cultural environment was in enhancing the smooth tripartite interactions among the researchers, communities, and host institutions. Outreach activities are critical for making the relevance of university education and research a reality to the local communities in African countries like Uganda (AICAD, 2011). It is imperative that all Uganda universities plan, develop, implement, monitor, and evaluate the effectiveness of outreach policies, programmes, projects, and activities from the 2015 MDGs to 2030 SDGs (Okaka, 2015). The principal issues are: community outreach research issues and communication strategies; researchers' outreach methods or approaches; quality assurance (QA) challenges facing higher education institutions (HEIs) in view of the SDGs especially achieving SDG 4 progress on universal access to quality education for all.

Policy makers as well as the public devote considerable attention to the outcomes of higher education (Okaka 2009, 4). For some aspects of higher education outputs and outcomes, such as the type and number of degrees awarded, the research outputs produced or the labour-market returns to higher education studies, numerous indicators exist at both national and international levels (OECD 2007). For example, the key issues of university and higher education in Tanzania largely revolve around the following (Msolla 2000, 5): financing, expansion and access, quality assurance and relevance, information and communication technology (ICT), building a skilled human capital, and research. Infrastructure services for ODEL QA outreach services.

However, quality assurance and relevance calls for improving accessibility to higher and technical education must go in tandem with quality assurance for the education being provided for (Msolla 2008). There has been some feeling among members of the public that the quality of education, both at school and University levels is declining (Msolla 2000). The decline is in part attributable to laxity in the enforcement of the known quality control measures, and in part due to lack of a national qualifications framework (NQF).

Likewise, a report at the first European forum for quality assurance in Munich said that the development of a quality culture demands: open, active commitment to quality at all levels; willingness to engage in self-evaluation; a firm regulatory framework; clarity and consistency of procedures; responsibilities for quality control and quality assurance; emphasis on obtaining feedback; commitment to identifying and disseminating good practice, as well as prompt managerial action to redress problems (Newton, 2006).

In addition, it states that quality as a transformation evolves through: development or empowerment of student by learning process; institutional changes enabling better learning or research; accreditation that explores value-added elements to widening access; external examination of research degrees to evaluate transformation; principal evaluation mechanism for improvement audit, as well as forward-looking and agenda-setting. ODEL offers the prospects (Okaka & Nagasha, 2016,).

2. Problem Statement

Although university - community video conferencing (meeting) technology provides multiple research, policy, and publications communication benefits and opportunities for sustainable development goals (SDGs) in Africa (UN, 2015), its adoption or diffusion is still wanting due

to lack of awareness. In addition, a government-commissioned study has described productivity of Ugandan PhD holders as ‘dismal,’ (GoU, 2013). AICAD research project and community outreach evaluators found that most AICAD/JICA funded projects which were implemented by AICAD member university researchers from Uganda were generally less effective and very unsuccessful in their community outreach operations (AICAD, 2012).

3. Methodology

This review was conducted by sourcing documents, current literature and news bulletins, online search engines, through policy analysis as well as discussion with :

- Key informants;
- Communication theories and best practice;
- Documents from Ugandan government specifically the ministries of education;
- Finance through the Uganda National Council of Science and Technology;
- International, regional, and UN development / specialized organizations;
- Lessons learned from research ethical practice.

4. Video Conferencing Issues and Quality Assurance at Higher Education Institutions

The current status is still very disappointing as community outreach video conferencing policies are lacking in most universities. Video conferencing can fill the multiple gaps like wrong: attitudes, behaviour, methodology, project perceptions, communication strategies, and cross – cultural interactions; there were common field research themes, agreements, modalities, methods (surveys, clinical trials, experiments, labs, pilots), communities, networks, and funding sources; too many absentee field researchers; fictitious research sites; group conflicts, and weak research ethics culture, lack of capacity, experience, ICT infrastructure, facilities, networking, and effective communication strategies.

QA is an imperative for effective university strategic planning, implementation, monitoring, and evaluation of research outreach policies, programmes, projects, and activities for the SDGs with a focus on SDG 4 on quality education for all. Ineffective outreaches have failed to bring change among the beneficiaries; weak or lacking teaching, learning, as well as outreach output indicators. Most HEIs are still afflicted by inadequate funding of strategic plans; insufficient ICT facilities (for teaching, learning, research, and ODEL), poor QA, low research culture, and lack of research outputs communication strategies (Okaka, 2016). At the institutional level, specific analysis needs to be made from the following perspectives: the programs, student assessment, quality of the staff, students admission, facilities and infrastructure (IUCEA/DAAD 2010, 4).

There are multiple gaps in university coordination, concepts, methods, planning, budgeting, and implementation leading to project failures, budget overruns, conflicts, and disincentives; video conferencing outreach activities use a variety of methods such as: community media literacy (including radio, TV, internet, mobile phones, newspapers, ICTs), school curricula, presentations, public meetings and focus groups, surveys , promotional posters and brochures, contests and special events, telecenters, community centers, internship placements, distance learning. virtual field trips, arts, and field labs. Prior idea of levels or nature of change one wants to effect (knowledge, attitudes, and practice) is vital for effective planning, implementation, and evaluation of outreach activities for the target video conferencing community audience.

The following aspects for the assessment of the quality of IUCEA member institutions: requirements set by the stakeholders; philosophy, mission, and vision of the institution; policy

plan; governance; human resources; funding and financial management; educational activities; research; community outreach; benchmarking; quality assurance; achievements (outcomes); and satisfaction of the stakeholders (IUCEA & DAAD, 2010). In most HEIs, the expected and actual input indicators, research indicators, teaching and learning indicators, internal service indicators, and output indicators are quite unsatisfactory to the society.

Recent studies have found that most university graduates in the sub-region (67 % from Uganda), lack employable skills on one hand; while on the other hand, the productivity of most of the Ugandan PhD holders who are living and working in the country, has been described as dismal, for a variety of practical reasons (Okaka & Nagasha, 2016). Institutions rarely collect, analyze, and use vital information to manage their activities.

HEIs in Uganda in particular, have rarely published full, impartial, and objective information (quantitative/qualitative) about their programmes and awards offered. Most institutions are yet to launch a structured monitoring system to collect information about the quality of their activities including (IUCEA & DAAD, 2010): student evaluations; student progress system; structured feedback from the labour market; and structured feedback from the alumni. Besides, higher education has already developed its own approach to quality assurance during a period of internal quality assurance (IQA) progress.

Some of the common key university-challenges facing internal QA system include:

1. Lack of quality assurance awareness.
2. Resistance against (due to misperceptions).
3. Resistance of staff because they feel threatened.
4. There is not enough knowledge on QA available in the universities.
5. There is resistance as QA is seen as time consuming and costly (additional workload).
6. It is difficult to (specifically) define quality; so QA indicators are not always clear;
7. The purpose of QA and the added value are not always clear
8. Poor communication between the staff and the institutions' management.

Most of the findings were generally disappointing, contrary to the widely issued guidelines by the IUCEA and NCHE (Okaka & Nagasha 2016). There are unresolved ethical issues that are worsened by communication gaps challenges include: wrong attitudes, behaviour, methodology, perceptions, communication strategies, and cultural illiteracy; commonalities of outreach themes, agreements, modalities, methods, target communities, networks, and funding sources; many absentee field researchers and fictitious research sites; and weak ethics culture. Ethical issues are prompted by flouting ethical guidelines, weak or lack of capacity, experience, integrity, professionalism, communication skills, or ignorance. There are multiple gaps in university IQA coordination, concepts, methods, planning, budgeting, and implementation leading to project failures, budget overruns, conflicts, and disincentives. One of the neglected areas in university courses is *gender mainstreaming*.

As a result, the IUCEA (2015) introduced a specific thematic cluster on *gender*. The principal objective is to provide a framework for a course that equips students with knowledge and skills to apply gender perspectives to all aspects of life. The expected student learning outputs and outcomes include the abilities to:

- Demonstrate knowledge and understanding of gender concepts and their importance to personal and societal development;

- Use technological tools and methods for gender disaggregated data and empirical evidence in addressing gender issues;
- Demonstrate critical understanding and ability to share gender knowledge and skills as change agents in society;
- Underscore the significance of women's empowerment by recognizing sexist bias, *gender imbalance*,
- Distortions and trivialization of women's contribution to mainstream development;
- Appreciate the importance of strategic alliances between men and women in addressing gender inequalities;
- Describe strategies for addressing gender inequalities;
- Demonstrate an understanding of the value of gender equitable access to, and control of resources;
- Apply knowledge and skills acquired to mainstream gender in their respective disciplines as well as social and professional lives;
- Demonstrate understanding of national, regional and international frameworks for gender equality and women's empowerment.

QA does best through local community - private – public – partnerships (CPPP) that in turn thrive on outreach communication strategies. For example, Kyambogo University strategic plan (KYU 2014) has identified among its focal areas for academic and research development initiatives, Open, Distance, and E-Learning capacity building as well as strengthening. This entails among others, procuring adequate computer labs, computers, and ICT compliant teaching and learning infrastructure to facilitate OPDEL with quality online courses or programmes. Department of Distance Education has produced initial modules for distance learning programmes that were advertised using brochures and principally the internet. Its principal objective is to increase accessibility to education through open, distance, and e-Learning courses.

5. Conclusion and Recommendations

Community participation ensures trust, effective communication, and social acceptance of the innovations. Inter-cultural community involvement promotes ethical research good practice among the researchers themselves on one hand, and inter-cultural demographics plus the host institutions, on the other benefit from video conferencing.

Video community outreaches are critical for achieving early adoption diffusion of research ethics and culture in communities. Video conferencing should be well planned, implemented, monitored, and evaluated for enhanced participation, transparency, empowerment, mutual trust, sustainability, and gender equality to achieve 2030 SDGs progress in Uganda and the rest of the African countries. Most university outreaches are hindered by weak institutional capacity, low staff morale, wrong approaches, uncoordinated planning and implementation, weak north-south cooperation funding gaps, staff development, PPP gaps, lack of strategic planning, bureaucracy, poor timing, ethics, and disincentives.

The prevalent low or poor quality standards of teaching and learning out-puts in the sub-regional HEIs, demand unprecedented levels of investments in quality assurance policy networking, enhanced capacity building, practical university-community-public private partnerships (UCPPP), South-South and North-South collaborations communication coordination, gender mainstreaming, ICT access and effective deployment, ethics, attitudinal, behaviour, management, and strategic IQA .policy change. The QA institutions like the

IUCEA, NCHE, and universities or the higher education institutions are still heavily underfunded and under too well resourced to fully perform their regulatory mandates for QA. Effective video conferencing outreach policy will fast-track Africa's long – term 7 dreams for via ICT - led research and publications dissemination: a prosperous Africa with inclusive and sustainable development; an integrated, united continent with Pan- Africanism for renaissance; good governance, democracy, human rights, justice, and the rule of law; a peaceful and secure Africa; a strong cultural identity, common heritage, values, and ethics; Africa where development is people-driven; and a united Africa with global influence.

- Video conferencing technology is viable, accessible, affordable, cost cutting, time saving, interactive, efficient, effective, flexible, and vital.
- conferencing can be moderated to benefit the deaf by signers.
- Video conferencing propels public, private, and community partnerships.
- Video conferencing promotes gender equality for inclusive education.

5.1 Recommendations for Research and Practice

- Enhance video conference funding for climate change research and policy dissemination projects.
- Strengthen South-South, North-South collaboration, ICT access, research culture, local capacity building, and community outreach
- Recording video - conferences made available in a variety of ways like CDs, DVDs, streaming video.
- Improving distance education, other applications like meetings, academic, dissertation or thesis defences, telemedicine, palliative care, as well as online conferences.
- Enhance outreach programs like: industrial training (IT), school and college practice, community practice, distance learning, open education for good relationships among all stakeholders.
- Software for local translations
- Electronic dictionaries and guides
- ICT literacy for children & women
- Innovative video conferencing outreach awareness campaign as regular institutional education, research, publications, training, and dissemination programs

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