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The MTN Foundation Projects and the Challenge of Sustainability

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ABSTRACT

This paper examines the benefits of MTN Foundation Educational Projects in three pioneer universities in Nigeria for the provision of electronic information resources to support the aims and objectives of teaching, learning, research and leisure. The paper revealed accrued benefits that include availability of current and relevant information resources, access and retrieval, daily services at invariably no cost and obtaining hardcopies at far less the price obtainable in commercial centres. It concludes that the challenges of sustainability includes cost of updating the already subscribed databases, e-journals, e-books, renewal of internet connectivity and general maintenance of the hard and software. The paper therefore recommends that sustainability can only be achieved through integrated, viable, inclusive, participatory and concerted collaborative efforts by the benefiting universities and libraries.

Introduction

Corporate Social Responsibilities (CSRs) remains significant in the actualization of companies and societal desires and needs. Its application varies from society to society because of factors like social structures. The Nigerian university is an information seeking community where information resources, availability and access facilitate the objectives and aims of the university. The MTN Nigeria, as one of its corporate social responsibilities chose three Nigerian universities to build state of the art Information and Communication Technology (ICT) centres (phases 1-3) which provide current, consistent and relevant information resources to fulfill the learning, teaching, research and recreational needs of these universities. The universities are to serve as pioneers and are located in three geopolitical zones of Nigeria. They include Ahmadu Bello University, Zaria, University of Lagos and the University of Nigeria, Nsukka.

MTN's choice of the libraries to oversee the centres is in line with the position of the library as facilitator for achieving university goals and objectives. This is to also overcome obsoleteness and inconsistencies observed with the evolving knowledge and technologies. The benefits of this gesture can be confirmed in the words of Chigbu (2010) that, "facilitation of scholarship communication is very essential to the

benefit and growth of academics and the development of the society at large". The libraries' functionality constitutes the effectiveness of information access, availability and retrieval making it possible to have a dependable and continuous supply of information resources, essential and different areas of specialization.

Though, hitches and failures of numerous projects aimed at unifying information resources prompted the National Universities Commission (NUC) to start NUNet (Nigeria Universities Network). The project could not link up the universities because of lack of a formidable and sustainable policy implementation (Iwhuwhu and Eyekpegha, 2009). Low or inadequate budgetary allocations to parent institutions where libraries are situated have also tremendously affected acquisition of current and relevant information resources (Webster, 1994; Chigbu, 2010). Obsoleteness of information resources directly affects utility rates. This has affected patronage of the libraries (Ingram and Clay, 2000). Most of these have change with the inception of Information and Communication Technology (ICT) into the library services. Libraries are transformed from a central repository of printed resources to a gateway for gaining global access to information databases of various electronic journals, books and many other e-sources. ICT has encouraged more rapid publications and more readership than the paper resources. This assertion is supported by Kling and Coril (2009) who gave the virtues of electronic resources as rapid dissemination of acceptable articles.

Statement of The Problem

Maintenance, subscription or infrastructure remains a serious barrier to resources availability, access, storage and retrieval because of poor budgetary allocations and the initial subscription cost for information resources. These barriers have been resolved by MTN Foundation in the three pioneer universities. The project is for a probation period of five years, after which it will hands over the centres to the benefiting universities. How this can be sustained the implications thereafter necessitate the call for effective sustainable measures.

Multiplicity of the MTN Foundation Educational Projects

The ICT built in the three centres serve as e-library, virtual library or digital library depending on the perception. It is electronic because all the information resources are in electronic format and are handled, preserved, circulated and communicated electronically. The multiplicity agrees with Kena (1998) who said that electronic information environment can also be referred to as virtual or digital environment because the collections are in electronic formats with the technology needed to utilize and explore them.

Benefits of MTN Foundation Educational Projects

Benefits enumerated included improved standard of learning, research, recreation and teaching at practically no cost. There are available reference materials for all courses taught and therefore affecting the quality and broadening knowledge. The fear of failure of full accreditation emanating from lack of knowledge base information resources is now a thing of the past. Importantly, it encourages computer literacy and competences in all endeavours through self-help, on-the-

hands and face-to-face with the systems.

The foundation has provided the pertinent measures and requirements in academic environment by promoting and contributing to improved quality learning, teaching and research through accessibility to reliable information resources in the institutions' libraries where the projects are situated. This can be likened to Annerose (2009) assertions, that these improved libraries services have also improved bargaining power. These libraries can now negotiate more effective and improve library income that was epileptic and inconsistent in the past.

Objectives of the Study

The objectives of this study are:

(1) To ascertain the sustainability measures for the continuity of these ICT centres by MTN Foundation and the Pioneer universities.
(2) To assess the sustainability measures, and
(3) To suggest feasible sustainability measures to MTN Foundation and the benefiting three pioneer universities.

Literature Review

Brophy (2004) confirmed the increasing interest by information centres on users' expectations and need to improve the quality of collections. Udoh *et al*. (2010) argued that increasing interest is not enough without access. Accordingly, Akinde and Adagunodo (2000) said that the expectations of people are high when sourcing for and retrieving information. Aguolu (2002) believed that enormous utility of the World Wide Web was attributed to ease and availability of information resources.

Chandrasekhar and Ghosh (2001), Silva and Figueroa (2002) agree that ICT is critical for bringing the desired change in developing countries of Africa. But Wangwe and Rweyemamu, (2001), Sahay (2001) and World Bank (1999) opined that the effect of the post colonial era has its effects to the underdevelopment and utilization of the emerging technologies. They stated that programmes developed were to encourage basic literacy skills of writing and reading and provide basic social services for the people. However, achieving higher levels of literacy remained problematic because of low quality education and unconducive social, economic, political and cultural environment.

The call for ICT sustainability is pertinent because it would not be of benefit when left unattended to. It will not deliver any benefits on their own unless they are supported and enhanced by skilled human resources coupled with appropriate institutional capacity (Kimaro, 2006).The CSR of MTN foundation project for education especially in the tertiary institutions should not be one in futility when they leave, as observed by International Aid Agencies and reported by Kerpela *et al* (2000) and Heeks (2002).

Methodology of the Study

Interview and observation were two qualitative research methods used for the study. The choice of the method was borne out of the need to understand the impressions and/or experiences of the three centres on the MTN Project, and gather information on the capability, constraints and achievements on the project operations. This agrees with Guba and Lincoln (2005) who posited that validation through qualitative

methods aims to gather an in-depth understanding, stating reasons and drawing inferences that provide solutions to problems.

Results and Discussion

Sustainability measures

Sustainability measures are prerequisite for effective management of resources as well as increased efficiency. The measure will also increase work productivity and reduce overhead cost. The MTN Foundation intervention in the three Universities facilitate these universities to scale through the Nigerian Universities Commission (NUC) accreditation. This therefore implies that the system must be sustained to also overcome the hash prevailing economic, social and political conditions and the inability to effectively actualize the literacy campaign programmes.

The call for sustainability measures has its base and challenges first on human capacity building. Kimaro (2006) asserted that the failure of sustainability measures for ICT is attributable to failure to build the human capacity aspect of ICTs qualitatively and quantitatively. Accordingly, the ability to satisfy users can be evaluated through express accessibility which remains the yardstick for effective service delivery in a library.

Other ICT challenges are technologies and the social prerequisites. These issues determine the viability of the technology for sustainability. Works by other authors revealed other underlying factors spanning economic, social, geographical and gender to constitute failures of ICT development projects (Reddy *et al.*, 2004; Apantaku and Lawal-Adebowale, 2009).

The Application of Sustainability Measures

Respondents appealed that the pioneer centres must not undermine the four factors characterizing the digital divide. This includes awareness, availability, accessibility and affordability (Rahul *et al.,* 2005). Therefore application of sustainability measures hinges on:

Awareness: Publicity of activities of the MTN Libraries must be made known, the stock and matters relating to service delivery, regulations and limitations be communicated to patrons. The respondents all agreed that allotment of time daily to those who want to utilize the services of the centres, periodic registration of new patrons, sensitization during orientations, matriculations and posters when utilized to be of immense contribution to the awareness campaigns.

Availability: It must be offered within reasonable proximity with appropriate hardware/software. This is a serious problem because all the pioneer universities have other campuses while the centres are situated in the main campuses. The deprivation caused by this much and calls for appropriate measures that will ensure that others residing in the other campuses are not left out.

Accessibility: This means the ability to use the ICT (library, e-literacy, language, interfaces, etc). The call for constant sensitization and induction trainings is necessitated and recommended for inclusion in the admission policy of the universities, so that freshmen are given equal the opportunity to develop interest and utilize the facilities as well.

Affordability: This covers life-cycle costs, termed, total cost of ownership; spanning hardware, software,

connectivity and education. This is very worrisome because many of the universities do not have working documents and/or records showing replacement of hardware, software, renewal and connectivity cost. The generated data are very important for facilitating accountability and ensuring that services provided are not to the detriment of the future patrons of the centre. Respondents asserted close collaboration between the Foundation and the library so that at the end of the probation period, it will be able to continue the sustenance of the centres.

Feasible Sustainability Measures

The only way sustainability measures for the MTN foundation in the three pioneer universities that can be meaningfully utilized is when there is great improvement across the Information and Communication Technology divide (Reddy, 2004; Rahul *et al.*, 2005). This divide are:

Computing:

Computers are prohibitively expensive for most people and shared access. Therefore, patronage of cyber cafes becomes inevitable. Information access is very difficult because of its multiplicity. Experts spend a lot of time in accessing resources. Computers are also difficult to use. Experts spend a lot of time maintaining the machines, worrying about upgrades, security, compatibility of the soft/hardware. It is now clear that ICT is more than computers, and the various thematic areas of sustainable development require innovations in hardware and software for applications such as sensors, controls systems, etc. Computers and other devices must become affordable, and rugged for use without extensive maintenance, security efforts or other specialized skills. They must become easier to use, with several interfaces and even in non-text interfaces (pictorial and spoken). This should govern procurements efforts by the beneficiaries.

Connectivity:

It is very expensive, limited and poor in providing data connectivity. The limitation of the system to main campuses is also worrisome. Broadband (data) connectivity is an important problem. The concern is at what price? It is therefore proposed that the Foundation still has a role to play even after the probation period.

Content:

Meaningful content is lacking because of freedom to host just anything on the web. This tends to make student response to research very passive and lacking in credibility. The call for rich content demands skills and complementing gadgets like multimedia (useful to overcome illiteracy) which in turn requires broadband connectivity. The call for the contents sustenance of MTN foundation becomes imperative because of its relevance to academic endeavours through its provision of relevant content (value) to end-users and also because it provides the required tools to make it easier for people to become producers of content and information. It is now time for universities and libraries to extensively develop appropriate solutions that will overcome barriers of information.

Human Capacity Building: The library staff and its patrons need to be aware, literate and innovative to harness the power of information technology and services made available by MTN Foundation. This can only be possible if they are empowered to use ICT. Of

course, ICT usage does not occur in a vacuum, but within social and cultural norms that also shape the divide. This is also based on policy and business models, especially regulation, so that in the long run, it must provide value and be sustainable from both user and provider perspectives. Markle Foundation Report (2003) believed that appropriating the right measures definitely considers not just for economic differences in access to technologies but also the cultural capacity and political will to apply these technologies for development impact. The centres are expected to develop beyond technical, social, cultural, and economic barriers. The benefiting universities can only succeed if the projects now, before the end of the probation periods are driven by complementary (non-ICT) institution building, such as the development of appropriate regulations, legal framework, and supply-chains.

Conclusion

It can be concluded that the sustainability of the centres depend solely on the ability of the universities and librarians to integrate, properly document operations, be keen on their sustainability and ensure that MTN's choice of the libraries because of their vital positions as pivots of learning, teaching, research and recreational needs is not in vain. Therefore, sustainability will ensure that the corporate bodies involvement in meeting societal desires and needs while appreciated could facilitate them satisfy their corporate objectives and goals as well. Also, very imperative that, this could encourage others who have not contributed to society to do so, as they are assured that their investment will be sustained and fully utilized for the purpose they are made for.

RECOMMENDATIONS

The following recommendations are proffered for the sustainability of the foundations.

- The Foundation can only help achieve development; it is a means and not an end. This calls for integration and development of all systems and not placing too much focus on one direction which will amount to the failure of optimally delivering value and services.
- Active efforts must be undertaken for foundation inclusiveness through concerted effort to avert the existing divides. This is because of the different societal needs, sustainability efforts must be made with great caution; solution might appear beneficial at a pilot or small scale, but replication and scaling are enormous challenges.
- The Foundatioh must be economically viable, and provide value for end-users. The foundation cannot thrive as a charity-outfit. It will become sustainable only when it delivers value. This is to say that the university management has great roles to play for intervention and subsidies' considering the fact that the project has high cost implications and long term effects.

The essence of the MTN Foundation Project is participation and collaboration if the project is to be relevant and sustainable. The call becomes necessary because of the challenges of development are vast. No single or group of developers can solve all of them. Collaboration, sharing experiences, and scaling can make solutions proffered relevant. Therefore,

all stakeholders, including beneficiaries and end-users, must have a voice in assessing its needs, responsibilities, and measures of success.

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