

PROFESSIONAL INTERACTION IN AN EDUCATIONAL INSTITUTION

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ABSTRACT

The study investigated the issue of unsatisfactory interaction in a distance education institution in Botswana by examining interaction dynamics among its employees. Unsatisfactory stakeholder interaction was perceived to stall delivery of educational service to students, the primary stakeholder. This, therefore, compromised learning and development. To investigate the problem, research questions were posed, and the primary one was: How extensive is the problem of lack of regulated interaction at the institution? Based on this, one of the objectives was to: systematically seek answers to the primary question by soliciting views about the nature and extent of the problem from the insiders. Pursuit of this was guided by the innovation change model, which stipulates investigation stages. Data were collected using two methods, namely, focus group and the written questionnaire. The study was conducted over a period of five weeks, and involved 167 employees of the organization to respond to the written questionnaire, and 23 purposively selected employees to participate in the focus group discussion. The study came up with several findings, and the pivotal one was admission by majority of the participants (78%) that the issue of unsatisfactory interaction was indeed a problem, and that participants (85%) had confidence that the initiative to address the problem had the potential to succeed in harmonising workplace relations. Specific overlapping areas that needed to be addressed, were spelt out as part of the results. The findings were mainly analysed thematically, with some few of them subjected to statistical interpretation. The main recommendation was that the institution should follow a model for purposes of addressing the problem in a more definitive manner.

Keywords: Cohesion, interaction, stakeholder engagement, collaboration, harmonization, overlapping, interface.

INTRODUCTION

A typical open and distance learning (ODL) institution is a decentralised structure, normally comprising administration, academic section, student services, and development services. Each pillar is further subdivided into operational departments, to achieve key performance indicators, geared towards attainment of the institutional mandate. Stakeholders at the institution, especially its employees, have expressed concern about the issue of unsatisfactory interface among the four pillars, to begin with, the numerous departments, and individuals at operational levels. Different terms are used to describe this phenomenon, including: *inter-departmental liaison*, *stakeholder engagement*, *teamwork*, *inter-departmental collaboration*, and *cohesion among departments*. It seems there is prevalent awareness of the need to bring the interface to happen more positively, but ways to bring this about seem to remain elusive. Experience has shown that there are many ideas on how to address the matter, usually vociferated in meetings and the grapevine (the rhetorical level), as well as awareness that the lack of cohesion among the departments, impacts negatively on motivation to accomplish, thus compromising quality service, learning, and student development.

The phenomenon of lack of cohesion has been observed during the past ten years at the institution, and the conclusion that interface/engagement/cohesion is less than satisfactory has

been arrived at. This scenario has been dubbed '*working in silos*', which simply means operating in isolation, with little or no consultation of stakeholders on issues of common interest.

Key Terms

Cohesion

This refers to the fact of forming a united whole.

Interaction

Ongoing influence that occurs as two or more people have an effect upon one another

Stakeholder engagement

The process by which an organisation involves people who may be affected by the decisions it makes or can influence the implementation of its decisions.

Collaboration

Collaboration is a working practice whereby individuals work together to a common purpose to achieve business benefit.

Harmonization

A collaborative and consultative process for developing greater consistency in work health and relations at the workplace.

Overlapping

Covering part of the same area of interest, responsibility e.g. in the workplace when two departments carry out more or less the same responsibility.

Interface

A point where two systems, subjects, individuals, or departments meet and interact

THE BACKGROUND

The study took place in the context of a distance education set up, which is decentralized. In the institution, there are departments such as course development, finance, examinations, academic registry, dispatch, tutorial services, information technology, human resources, regional offices, to name a few. Against this background, it has been observed that there are operations that overlap, commonly referred to as cross-cutting or overlapping issues. Examples include:

- Who should supervise and appraise part-time tutors - the regional office or subject experts based at headquarters?
- Whose responsibility is it to select students for a given programme, the offering department or Academic Registry?

These issues manifest themselves in different ways. The University Act, which is a constitutional provision, does not prescribe how the institution ought to handle such issues. Rather the Act is only an enabler, empowering an organization to come up with 'by-laws' on how to handle such matters. Where there is no conscious approach to do so, departments and

individuals fall into the habit of working individually at tasks with little or no consultation of stakeholders. They work in what has been referred to as *silos* in management parlance.

Silo mentality is an attitude that is said to be a current malaise in many educational institutions, including the one currently under investigation. This mindset is said to occur when several departments or groups fail to share information or knowledge with other individuals. This may be the result of several causative factors, including mistrust, differences in cultural backgrounds, prejudice, and work culture, or laggard leadership (Interaction Associates, 2014; Mannix & Neale, 2005; Gelfand & Brett, 2004). A silo mentality reduces efficiency and can be contributory to a failing corporate culture. Thus, it can also reduce morale, and may contribute to the demise, and deterioration of work ethics in an organization that would have been known to be productive.

Silos are standalone structures, but when referred to in organisations, they are management systems that work independently of each other and cannot exchange information with other related systems. To work across the silos, within an institution, means exchanging information with other groups, and keeping everyone in the loop.

It, therefore, becomes patently clear that institutions have to be consciously innovative when addressing the disconnect among individuals and departments caused by the silo mentality. This calls for innovation, defined as: "...the introduction of something new, involving change towards a new dimension of performance with added value to the customer" (<http://innovationzen.com/blog/2006/11/17/the-definition-of-innovation>).

The Problem

Though one cannot pinpoint exactly and objectively why there are issues within the institution, regarding interface at both individual and inter-departmental levels, there is acknowledgement by staff that professional interaction could be better than what it is currently. While each department has its assigned mandate within a particular substructure of the institution, there does not seem to be regulated mutual engagement with other departments. The same applies to individual-to-individual interaction. Observations have been made variously in ODL contexts that, by its very decentralised nature, the scenario of geographical apartness may also account for the less than satisfactory interaction. In the exercise of their functions, individuals in different sections, do not often succeed to engage as systematically as expected. The present study recognises a lack of knowledge about how extensive the problem is, and how best it can be addressed beyond the rhetorical level. Rhetoric refers to language designed to have a persuasive or impressive effect on its audience, but often regarded as lacking in sincerity or meaningful content (<https://www.google.com/search?q=What+is+rhetoric%>). *Ipsa facto* the conduct of research is presumed the only way to explore the problem.

Research questions

The primary research question is:

1. How extensive is the problem of lack of regulated interaction?

This question is supported by three subsidiary ones, namely:

2. What evidence is available about the prevalence of the problem of incoherent interface in the institution?

3. What factors contribute to the unsatisfactory interaction?
4. How best could the College promote more purposeful and regulated interface?

Objectives of the study

Taking the problem and the research questions in mind, the objectives of the study are to:

1. systematically seek answers to the primary question by soliciting views about the nature and extent of the problem from insiders, that is, employees of the institution.
2. solicit views from stakeholders on how best the current state of affairs could be addressed in a manner that would lead to maximization of work operations for the ultimate good of all stakeholders.
3. come up with an innovative model that could serve as the handmaid of desired change in the way employees interact at professional level.

The call for innovation

If BOCODOL is to remain the institution of choice for flexible and life-long learning, and demonstrate compliance with one of its core values: *we pull together (teamwork)*, there is need to make a conscious effort to be innovative. Out of numerous definitions of the concept of innovation, the following shall guide the present study:

Innovation entails the introduction of something new, involving change towards a new dimension of performance with added value to the customer.

This is further illustrated in Figure 1 below.

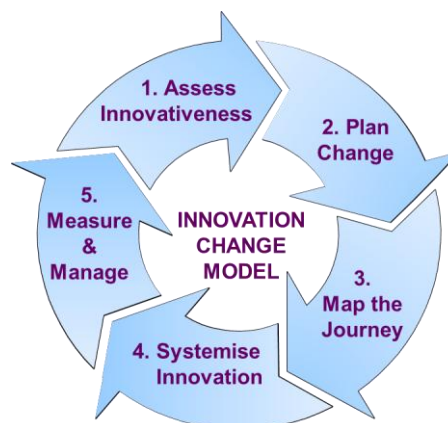


Figure 1 Innovation change model. Source: www.innovation-management.org/innovation-model.html

This model guided the researchers to explore the research questions, for example: What evidence is available about the prevalence of the problem of incoherent interface? In brief, the model purports that the desire to achieve positive interface is synonymous with bringing about change by following the five steps illustrated above. Thus, the present study went only up to Stage 4 where systematic innovation was proposed for adoption by the institution. Stage 5, to do with measurement and managing interaction, was left to the implementation stage, that is, after conclusive research findings were in place. The current initiative is, therefore, conceptualized as *innovative change*, described by Forsyth (2012) as the sort of change

designed to improve what is currently routinely done, in this instance enhancing service provision in learner development through positive employee-to-employee interface.

This is the type of change initiative, wherein certain factors of common importance were aimed at, namely:

- need to change behaviour;
- need to influence attitudes and beliefs;
- need for a shared vision;
- taking on board new knowledge;
- ensuring availability of requisite skills; and
- coming to terms with the culture of the work environment.

The targeted innovation is linked to positive changes in institutional efficiency, productivity, quality, competitiveness, and enhancing the market share. It is against this simplified theoretical foundation that the investigation procedures were based.

Prior studies in the field

A study conducted by Interaction Associates (2014) studied workplace trust and its impact on business in order to gain insights into the role of collaboration, leadership, and trust in achieving key business outcomes. Some of the findings of the study, which are of interest to the present study were that:

- Although employees were of the opinion that trust is critical to being effective in their jobs, many trust their bosses less.
- Employees crave transparency from their leaders, and want input into decisions that affect them.

The significance of the study is that it points at the importance of good leadership regarding institution-wide positive interaction. This implies that in the absence of trust between the leader(s) in the organization, issues like communication and motivation to excel are likely to be compromised.

In yet another study titled: *Fluidity and performance in intercultural workplace interactions*, Sanchez-Burks and associates (2006) investigated how culture-based differences in relational attunement differentially affect the way employees perceive workplace interactions. Results of the study demonstrated how performance in intercultural workplace interactions can be compromised even in the absence of overt prejudice. The researchers further argued that prejudice and distrust are common obstacles to productive social interaction when individuals are able to detect differences in cultural backgrounds (Brief, 1998; Jehn, Northcraft, & Neale, 1999; Williams & O'Reilly, 1998). Such obstacles often make it difficult for individuals to establish rapport and to exchange and integrate their ideas, effort, and resources. Ethnic prejudice and prejudice arising from people from different nationalities working together, could actually lead to behavior that is discriminatory, thus adversely affecting work relationships. Workers begin to categorise themselves as "us versus them" (Fly and Thomas, 2001), or 'me' versus 'you'. In other words, non-conscious out-group or individual prejudices are often manifested in subtle and unintentional ways, leading to, sometimes, uncontrollable negative attitudes towards other employees. Such attitudes, when they are reciprocal, prevent teamwork since they act as barriers to collaborative interaction.

This section has demonstrated that comparable studies have been carried out, and these lend

credibility to the present investigation.

Investigation procedures

Guided by the research questions, the present section details the design, sampling, and methods used to solicit data.

The investigation followed the case study design, characterized as examination of how an issue or problem is handled within a given institution or educational context. Scholars (e.g. Kempis and McTaggart, 1982; Yin, 1984; Flyvbjerg, 2006) have referred to this practice as the in-depth investigation of a single instance of some social phenomenon or some institutional project. The case study:

...provides a systematic way of looking at events, collecting data, analysing information, and reporting results. Ultimately, the researcher may gain sharpened understanding of why the instance happened as it did, and what might become important to look at more extensively in future research.

Flyvbjerg (2006:224)

Procedurally, two methods were used, namely, focus group discussion and written questionnaire. It was rationalized that the two would help solicit information in answer to three questions posed in §5.0 above, to do with:

- how extensive the phenomenon of unsatisfactory interaction was;
- what the actual evidence of poor interface was available; and
- how the problem could be addressed (as reflected in views expressed by research participants).

The multi-method study, involves different methods of data collection and analysis within a single research paradigm. The paradigm in this case is constructivism, also known as interpretivism, and focuses on understanding the meanings and interpretations of 'social actors'; as well as to understand their world from their point of view (cf. Hatch and Cunliffe, 2006). This is a kind of triangulation, which refers to the use of more than one approach to the investigation of a research question in order to enhance confidence and trustworthiness in the ensuing findings.

Data collection through focus group discussion

One of the faculties took the initiative to investigate the problem. It decided to run a two-day Faculty Board workshop to which all departments were invited to participate in the focus group discussion.

A focus group is a common qualitative research technique, which asks participants for open-ended responses conveying thoughts or feelings about a phenomenon. As a representative sample of college functionaries, the focus group had the potential to offer insights consistent with those shared by the broader target market, that is, all other college employees. Robinson (1999, p.905) has put it even more explicitly, saying the method helps the researcher obtain, "...direct feedback through face-to-face contacts with people using their products and services. Focus groups are a direct method of obtaining rich information within a social context". Thus, the method helps the researcher to explore the attitudes and needs of staff in a given context.

This procedure was followed:

- a. Invitation was extended to all departments to send representatives to the workshop.
- b. The objective of the workshop was spelt out in advance for all, namely, to share ideas about core operational functions with cognate stakeholders. Deliberations were expected to result in harmonised understanding of such functions. Resolutions on the way forward were to be documented for shared use.
- c. The Head of the School invited agenda items on overlapping matters, college-wide, that is, from all functional sections, which interacted with the School in one way or the other.
- d. The proposer of an item was expected to prepare a 10-minute description and explanation of the item, and suggest how that particular area of overlap could be handled more interactively.
- e. A 10-minute discussion, during which stakeholders were expected to give their input, would follow resulting in documented resolutions to be followed as the way forward.
- f. Two lecturers from the School were tasked with recording the proceedings during focus group discussion.

A total of 20 items came from participants as agenda items. These are summarized in Table 1 below. Altogether a sample of 23 participants was in attendance. It was commonly agreed, at the beginning of the Workshop, that deliberating upon the items would enhance reconciliation of expectations in the day-to-day operations where activities overlap. The term *points of consensus* was suggested and adopted for use to specifically refer to agreements around individual items, and to document that as guidelines for inter-departmental engagement henceforth. Findings from the dialogue around individual items are listed in Table 4. Conclusions drawn from them are listed in the last column.

Table 1: Findings from the focus group

Item	Findings	Conclusions
1. Workshop Overview	The Chair explained goals of the workshop.	The goals of the workshop to find ways of harmonizing expectations on cross-cutting matters were adopted.
2. Part-time tutors: recruitment, records, assignment, challenges	Departmental representatives concurred that this was a problem in the College, and outlined areas of challenges as recruitment, communication with regions, procedures in employing part-time tutors.	It was concluded that this area needed solution, and the group came up with suggestions and an agreed process for College-wide consideration.
3. Selection of students: Procedure	This was found to be a problem from several angles, e.g. who should advertise, role of offering departments and the regional offices.	It was concluded that there was need to come up with consensus by concerned departments on the entire process. Suggestions were made during the interaction.
4. Programme tutorial cycle	The finding was that this needs harmonization, and	It was concluded that one specific department should drive the task

	clear collaboration between departments. The role of regions needed clarification	every semester, but coopt relevant departments.
5. Assignment procedures: Preparation, processing, records, improvements	The findings were that: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • For both assignments and exams, processes were not clear • Bloom's Taxonomy Was not appreciated by many academics 	It was concluded that there is urgency in revisiting the three elements of collaboration. Though suggestions were made, these needed refinement.
6. Examination Procedures: Preparation, processing, records, improvements		
7. Blooms Taxonomy: significance in setting test items		
8. Editorial services and the Schools	Departments offering programmes were not clear how they should relate with the editorial section, and in turn, editorial found there was a gap in its interface with schools.	There is need for clarification of roles and how best to promote more professional engagement.
9. Partnership Dept. & Schools	There were no findings because of lack of representation	No conclusions were drawn
10. Centre for Graduate Studies and Schools	There were no findings because of lack of representation	No conclusions were drawn
11. Portfolio and research project: SOBMS position, challenges	The conduct of research was found to be an area of concern among departments, especially schools and the regions.	The conclusion was that there should be dialogue, supported with interventions from schools on processes.
12. Referencing across schools: Harvard & APA	For this cross-cutting issue, it was established that there was no common understanding on which system ought to be used.	Although suggestions were made, the conclusion is that it is necessary to have a discussion, supported with resolutions, among the departments.
13. Library Resources: Books, Journals	It was established that there were gaps between schools and the library in a number of areas.	It was necessary for the concerned departments to identify gaps and come up with possible solutions.
14. Communication and study skills across the schools	This was recognized as a critical area among the academic departments whose resolution was long overdue.	The conclusion drawn was that concerned departments should convene meetings to address the matter, which impacts negatively on learner performance.
15. Bank of past assignments and exam papers	The absence of either electronic or hardcopy repository for this, was recognized as a problem	The conclusion drawn was that departments offering programmes ought to find a lasting solution collaboratively with other interested parties.

16. Monitoring tutor performance	Although the College has been engaging tutors for over 14 years, there was no system in place to appraise tutor performance.	An evaluation tool, agreed upon by concerned parties was to be put in place and applied procedurally.
17. In-house journal for the institution	The finding was that previously, initiatives to share research skills had been taken. However, nothing tangible had yet been realized to apply those skills.	The focus group was generally unanimous that starting a College journal would encourage novice writers to start applying acquired skills. The challenge was who would drive the project.
18. Review of Modules: reviewing after 3 or more years, common modules across programmes	Members of the focus group, but especially those from the regions, expressed concern about the standard of some of the modules.	It was concluded that some modules required revision as a matter of urgency. Some of the modules had exceeded their average period of currency.
19. External Examiners	The finding from the focus group came as a concern that many programmes in the School of Business had not been quality assured by external examiners since their inception.	The conclusion was that concerned departments should address the matter, and come up with a system to ensure regularity of external examiners.
20. Postgraduate programmes	Three challenges were identified by the group, namely: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Accessing executive venues against rather low fees • Portal problems • Logistical issues 	The conclusion was that fees for postgraduate programmes needed reviewing, and once that is done the issue of quality venues would be addressed more definitively

In sum, the mapped out twenty items signify how extensive the problem of unregulated interaction in the institution can be. This provides answers to the primary question, pertaining to the scope of the problem. Discussion among focus group members yielded suggestions as to why interaction among departments was less satisfactory than expected. This answered the question to do with contributory factors to unsatisfactory interaction. Finally, participants came up with suggestions on how best to address the items under discussion, hence answered the last question on how best the institution could promote more purposeful and regulated interface.

Data collection through the written questionnaire

Use of the questionnaire method was found propitious for the current study on account of its widely acknowledged benefits. Large amounts of information can be collected from a large number of people in a short period of time and in a relatively cost effective way. The results

of the questionnaires can be quickly and easily quantified by either a researcher or through the use of a software package. Table 2 summarises the findings.

Table 2: Findings from the written questionnaire

Item	Findings	Conclusions
1. (a) Number of years working at the institution	The person with the lowest number of years serving at the institution has 2 years, while the longest serving (founder) has 15 years. The mean number of years is 6.	Participants have the experience of above 5 years, which qualifies them to comment on the <i>status quo</i> .
1(b) Your level of operation	Industrial – 4; Technical – 4; Professional – 24; Management – 10; Ex. Mgt.- 1	The highest number of respondents are professionals, followed by management. The former also constitute high numbers in the College, and deal with core business
2. Name of the department you work for	All departments were represented, with schools and student services being dominant.	Departments within the schools are more central to interaction, and do so with nearly every department in their day-to-day operations. Their interaction is visibly strongest with student services
3. Are work relations (at professional level) a problem at the institution?	The majority of 31 (78%) admit that work relationships in the organization are a problem, as opposed to 9 (22%) who do not think so.	The conclusion is that professional engagement is indeed a problem at the institution
4. List departments you work very closely with in the institution.	Frequencies showed that every department, which is not from the schools, works with the latter. The reverse was confirmed to be true by academic departments.	It is concluded that the need to interact is not in doubt. Similarly, the extent of interaction is fairly broad, confirming that the nature of operations in the institution does not seem to have scope for working in isolation.
5. To what extent are you clear of your role as an officer in your Department?	Statistics showed that 19 were Very clear; 19 were Clear; while 5 were Not sure of their role. In sum 88% were sure of their role, as opposed to 12% who were not.	The conclusion drawn was that in the institution, role clarity is not at all a problem for the majority. They know what they are supposed to do.
6. As an employee of	A total of 25 (60%) responded Yes, as	The finding implies that

the organisation, are there some responsibilities for which you are not sure whether they should be done by your department.	opposed to 17 (40%) who responded No.	while employees have role clarity as instanced in 5 above, the number is less when it comes to being sure as to who should drive certain tasks. This state of affairs strengthens the need to come up with researched interventions regarding mapping of processes.
7. List ten or more cross cutting/overlapping) areas.	Material development/quality assurance/learner tutor recruitment/assessment/training/learner-tutor induction/dispatch of material/M&E of study centres/graduation/research/admin issues/public relations/partnerships	The expressed areas, most of them specific, were reduced into broader categories. It is concluded that there are numerous areas of overlap, thus corroborating the findings of the focus group.
8. List any two tasks or projects, which you have worked on jointly with the four departments you listed in (4) above.	Responses to this question is confirmatory of findings in item 7 above, but these are individualized so show the nature of interaction for individual sections.	Finding demonstrates that college staff have many tasks to regularly work on collaboratively, instead of individually.
9. Suggest any two reasons why you found it difficult to work together as a team in which all departments were represented.	The following featured prominently as main reasons why collaborative interaction met difficulties: poor time management/poor communication/the lack of role clarity/a whole range of unprofessional attitudes/personality clashes/there are times when the expertise of some professionals is not recognized/lack of collaborative planning/misplacement of some managers and professionals/lack of grounding in ODL principles/inability or unwillingness to change (though the nature of change may not be clear)/inefficiency and ignorance about certain job-related processes and procedures by some managers	It is concluded that the majority of reasons for disaffection are social rather than academic. The fewer ones have to do with gaps in skills and knowledge of the job.
10. Suggest any two reasons which make you think you worked together well as a team while working on the tasks or projects.	The following findings were evident as positives in the institutional context: There was some semblance of teamwork in some tasks/sharing knowledge and resources/at times there was a common understanding of expectations/the rare occasions when communication was efficient /occasions	There are positive indicators of collaborative interface , which could be systematically capitalized upon within the College, few as they are.

	when others were appreciated/clarification of role/when people were given consultation opportunity	
11. Do you think the problems associated with workplace relations in cross-cutting issues can be resolved if the College made some effort to do so.	A total of 34 (85%) answered yes, while 6 (15%) do not think the College can remove silos.	The fact that the majority think effort to harmonise professional engagement can yield positive results, justifies the current initiative.
12. If you were to work together with the four departments (you mentioned in 3 above) on a new task, in the future, recommend four ways on how best to work together as a team as a way of addressing the problem.	The following came out most frequently as steps that should be taken to ensure there is satisfactory interaction in the College: Collaborative planning/continuous and regulated communication/leadership buy-in to be followed by the monitoring of agreed interventions/clearly defined terms of reference/proper scheduling of activities and projects/familiarity with policies and procedures/being strategic about meetings/depending on the project, form teams from different departments	The results reflect an important fact, namely, that staff are aware of the anomaly in interaction, and have constructive suggestions to make things work through systematic harmonization
13. Any other observations?	This question item attracted varied responses. However, some of them were considered over-reaching by the committee, so were not captured. This is mainly because they lacked substantiation, and had questionable relevance. The following obtain: lack of clear professional progression pathways/the need for well planned workshops at different levels to address unsatisfactory interface/ /need for systematic training in change management/coordinated communication on a regular basis/ regular need to clarify roles /some departments are more overworked than others due to fewer staff on the ground /lack of accountability by some staff/the monitoring of staff presence at work, and the actual work done by some staff members is too lax	Because of the broadened nature of the question, it attracted a range of responses, some relevant and others not so relevant. The committee considered that some of the issues raised might warrant a separate study.

The questionnaire was less controlled than the focus group in terms of demarcation of cross-cutting issues. Instead it encouraged respondents to be autonomous in terms of areas of overlap that concerned them personally. There was also a statistical element, which made findings more objective. Much more than the focus group, answers to questions addressed all four questions posed in §5.0 and responses appeared more spontaneous, therefore trustworthy. To sum up, the two methods complemented each other as demonstrated below where we compare and contrast them.

Contrasting findings from focus group and written questionnaire

- i. The focus group was a face-to-face affair where emotions, views, and anxieties were expressed and harmonized towards the reconciliation of opposing attitudes. Hence there was feeling, which is a critical component of coming to better understanding of one another's perceptions.
- ii. Sponsors of certain views about an overlapping issue clarified themselves in the presence of interlocutors, and answered questions, there and then, something, which best-written answers from the questionnaire could not achieve.
- iii. The responses to the questionnaire, on the other hand, were not constrained by fear to hurt a present interactant, hence they were numerous and more frank.
- iv. Some responses to the questionnaire were considered out of order as they sought to either settle scores or to embarrass some members of the institution. Contrary to this, responses to the focus group were more emotionally controlled, and members made a conscious effort to save face.
- v. Suggestions on collaborative tasks, reasons why people fail to work as a team, why roles were not clear, positive indicators identifiable in the College, and ways to improve work relationships, were more abundant in solicitations from the questionnaire than from the focus group.
- vi. The questionnaire covered more employees than the focus group did.

Comparing findings from focus group and written questionnaire

When compared, there are convergences between the two research methods in terms of data corroboration.

- vii. There was consensus from responses solicited by both methods that the problem of unsatisfactory interaction among departments is real, and not an imaginary one.
- viii. In terms of critical areas of overlap, there was concurrence that the issue of negative attitude towards each other constitutes the root of disaffection in many areas of overlapping responsibilities as listed in Table 1 above:
 - Handling examinations and assignments
 - Part-time tutor engagement and monitoring
 - The issue of research projects
 - Poor communication
 - Lack of role clarity

In both instances, it came out vociferously clearly that the issue of attitudes manifested itself in various guises - emotional, workplace politics (both drummed up and latent), despising, mistrust, disloyalty, deliberate indolence, pretense, and resisting advice. These also led to

personality clashes. Responses gave generous detail of typifications. The sum of it was articulated in the view that some attitudes are so fossilized that it would be difficult to change the entrenched mindsets of some staff. In essence, some employees have created barriers to change, little wonder some respondents (15%) answered that effort to harmonise relations would not succeed.

Limitations of the Study

The study has had its limitations.

Firstly, the focus group was affected by sporadic attendance, where participants went in and out due to competing commitments. In mitigation, there was consistent attendance of not less than 12 out of 23 participants at any one time. The number remained representative of more than five departments. Discussion was also in-depth and was consciously guided through posing pertinent questions by the chair (participant observer).

Secondly, there were IT challenges in terms of network, whereby the questionnaire could not reach participants, despite repeated attempts to reach them. Out of a total of 167 employees, only 43 responded (26%). However, scholars (e.g. Carley-Baxter, Hill, Roe, Twiddy, Baxter and Ruppenkamp (2009, p.3) consider that “10 to 25 percent in social sciences” is representative enough. The mitigating factor was that all levels of operation were represented, including executive management where there was one respondent. For a fact, then, the sample was inclusive, and the findings could be duly considered trustworthy and authentic.

Thirdly, one limitation could have been indifference (unwillingness to participate) by some employees of the College. Indifference is a legitimate entitlement to individuals, and the mitigating factor is that even for those who did not participate, their views were represented overwhelmingly by the cited percentage, which was way above the 10% threshold, commonly tolerated in research.

DISCUSSION

The study was conducted in order to search answers to these four questions:

1. How extensive is the problem of lack of regulated interaction?
2. What evidence is available about the prevalence of the problem of incoherent interface in the College, an ODL set up?
3. What factors contribute to the unsatisfactory interaction?
4. How best could the College promote more purposeful and regulated interface?

Highlights of the response have been summarized in Table 1 and Table 2. Deriving from findings (cf. second column of both Tables), conclusions have been drawn against each item (cf. third column of both tables). The available evidence confirmed that the problem of lack of regulated interaction is fairly extensive, and cannot be ignored. Without exception, all conclusions are characterised by these lead words: *there is need for...clarification, dialogue, interventions, review, engagement, interaction...there is urgency in...it is necessary to....convene meetings...address the matter...*

It has, therefore, been considered prudent to carry out discussion in accordance with themes disaggregated from the rich qualitative data, especially as the result of responses to questions 12 and 13 of the written questionnaire, which are:

12. If you were to work together with the four departments (you mentioned in 3 above) on a new task, in the future, recommend four ways on how best to work together as a team as a way of addressing the problem.
13. Any other observations?

Main themes

The call for innovation by the institution, as spelt out in §7.0, especially innovation that aspires to bring about change insofar as removal of the negative silo mentality is concerned, should be strategically anchored on the themes briefly discussed below.

a. Collaborative planning

This theme implies that any project or any task that affects departments should be more systematically planned than is currently the case. Findings point to situations where introduction of a new programme, for example, requires inclusion of stakeholders right from conceptualization to delivery/implementation.

b. Communication

Findings show that College members have problems with communication that lacks continuity and regulation. It would appear sentiments expressed verbally in the focus group argue for sensitivity about the need to communicate even those issues that might be considered too obvious. It emerged that regulated and strategic communication is not attributable to officers in positions of leadership only, but even those who carry out operations. They too require to act knowing what implications will result if they do not communicate adequately.

Failure to give feedback, or silence when stakeholders expect feedback, was observed as a common weakness in College operations. The thinking seems to be that conscious effort ought to be made by stakeholders to ensure the needful is always done.

c. Defined terms of reference

One finding was that although job descriptions could be clear, there are times when workmates may rap a colleague for going beyond his/her area of jurisdiction (acting *ultra vires*). This is significantly true in several areas of operation such as preparing an advertisement for a particular programme; allocating teaching subjects to part-time tutors; student selection; deciding on team leaders during live marking of examinations; quality assuring assignments/examinations; to name a few. Functioning in these and similar areas accounted for some of the misunderstandings that spawn negative attitudes, which compromise inter-departmental interaction.

d. Scheduling of activities and projects

There was an interesting finding, which came to light wherein respondents expressed concern about activities and projects foisted on them at short notice. Examples were: being asked to prepare a paper for presentation 'this afternoon to a team of visitors from Tanzania'; being told 'everyone is waiting for you in the Board Room' even when you did not know there was a meeting; being told that your region must prepare for a new programme, one or two weeks before the resumption of a semester, and so forth. The commonly expressed sentiment was that where departments are understaffed, it derails laid down plans when being called to change course without adequate advance notice.

e. Being strategic about meetings

This was considered a fairly straightforward theme wherein members of the College expressed their disquiet about meetings called at short notice, which end up being both poorly managed and having low attendance. In particular they indicated that meetings by whoever convenes them should be business-like, brief, and to the point. They opined that too many meetings, against a background of understaffing, disturb productivity. This may point towards review of the manner in which the College handles this matter.

f. Familiarity with policies and procedures

There was a finding, expressed by several respondents, pointing to the view that not everyone is aware what policies are in place, and that some employees have been rapped for not following a particular policy only when things go wrong. Some wondered who formulated policies and programme regulations, and to what extent these were commonly shared at the development stages. These observations may actually mean that the institution may need to strategise when it comes to policy formulation. In the focus group meeting, there was a suggestion that policies should be categorised according to areas of operation (Programmes, Student services, Corporate services, Development services). Therefore, policy formulation should be inclusive, and that once a particular policy is in place, there ought to be a constant way of reminding new employees and those already employed about the significance of policies in college operations. This should be done systematically on a yearly basis.

g. Distance

The respondents to both the focus group interaction and the questionnaire articulated this theme in different ways. Specifically, it was observed that there exists misunderstanding between regional employees and headquarters-based employees regarding the purpose of regional visits. Also, some of the observations made, pointed to lack of clarity about who should do certain tasks, which was tantamount to implying that there were times certain departments interfered with operations of the others. In the focus group, it was observed that the geographical distance between headquarters of the institution and regional centres located in different parts of the country, make a contribution unsatisfactory relations within the organisation. This was not confined to regional offices only, but the same effect has been felt across all departments even geographical distance aside. Thus, one issue calling for attention, in order to harmonize interactive engagement is that of transactional and geographical distance.

h. University culture

Concern about the university culture was expressed variously both in focus group discussion and questionnaire. Although not specifically solicited, a number of points raised in question 13 of the questionnaire implied that many employees do not seem clear how a university operates due to a number of factors such as: lack of exposure to the university culture; unsuitability to function in a university environment (unless given some induction/training); or limited capacity to cope with expectations. There could be more reasons, but it can only be surmised that for whatever reason the finding came up, it bears some impact on how employees of the institution researched into interact. In both principle and practice, the issue of ethos cannot be left to chance, but should rather be addressed systematically through more conscious interventions to ensure improved accountability, to ensure people are empowered, and that all should happen through regulated communication

i. Leadership buy-in

The findings pointed to the thinking that proposed interventions of any nature would not fly if there is no buy-in and commitment to functionalise them by the leadership. This was raised in the written questionnaire, but also verbalized in the focus group. In the latter, the advice was that there must be a mechanism by the leadership to measure and manage implementation and application of interventions in practice (See Figure 2, Innovation Change Model). It was one thing to have a good proposal in place, but being able to follow it through is something quite different.

In retrospect, the findings under the nine themes above, are critically significant on a global scale, that is, when taken with serious consideration, they apply to comparable educational institutions where employees have a role to play in the mandate to achieve the vision of the organization. This is no doubt a major contribution of the present study.

RECOMMENDATIONS

Just by going through individual overlapping items in Table 1, which captures data from the focus group); and Table 2, which captures data from the written questionnaire). Every conclusion drawn, with few exceptions, stands out clearly as a recommendation. It is, therefore, at the risk of repeating what has already been well said, to list recommendations. It, nevertheless, suffices to share a few. It is recommended that:

1. the institution should ride on the support of the majority of its staff (85%) who have agreed that the silo mentality can be successfully tackled through taking appropriate steps. This is simply because there is significant unanimity (78%) that the problem of unsatisfactory interaction/engagement in the workplace is a reality.
2. The College should take advantage of the positives that linger in the institution (as observed by staff members), and use them to revitalize a lagging workplace climate and systematically align it to its vision, mission, and core values. Some of the positives mentioned were that:
 - there has been some semblance of teamwork in some tasks;
 - staff have shared knowledge and resources interactively (in a number of cases);
 - at times there has been common understanding of expectations;
 - there have been occasions when communication was efficient;
 - there have been occasions when the expertise and effort made by some staff members has been appreciated; and
 - staff members have been consulted at times.
3. Initial attempt at breaking silos begins with senior management. If possible, a retreat by senior management to engage frankly on social and professional issues, which have been variously identified by respondents ought to be held. This would take a no-holds barred approach so that any vestiges of poor interface could be cleared. Though this may not be magical, it is hypothesized that an initiative of this nature, the first of its kind in the institution, might be a reasonable beginning.
4. The College should develop a model for use when addressing the issue of unsatisfactory interaction.

Proposed Model

A model is a representation of a proposed structure (as miniature) used to describe what the institution under study could do to implement the change initiative, thus addressing the issue

of unsatisfactory inter-departmental interaction. Informed by the foregoing findings, the model is, *inter alia*, expected to lead to the creation of a more collaborative environment cognizant of institutional core values. These include customer focus; equitable access to educational services; teamwork; innovation; and entrepreneurship.

Indications from research findings reflect absence of the said values in practice, or their minimum presence. The Model proposed is expected to foster these positive traits in the interaction and engagement among operatives: satisfaction with assigned post; positive stress; minimized tension and anxiety; to name a few.

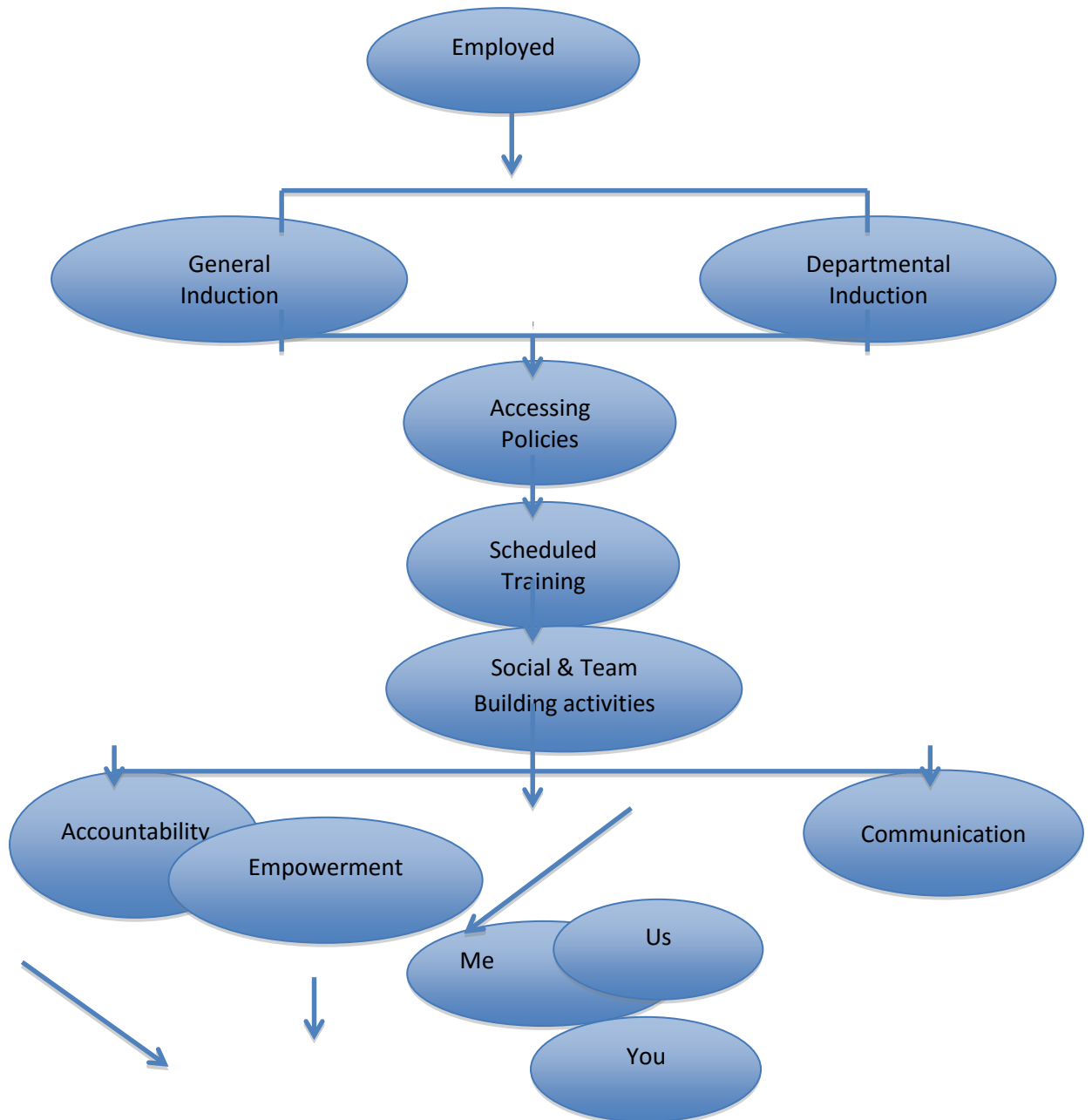


Figure 2: Model of Workplace Interaction

The above Model is explained as follows. Upon being **employed**, the employee should undergo both **general induction** and **departmental induction**. Presuming that there are **policies and procedures** in place, the new employee should be consciously directed to access these documents. Similarly, staff in positions already, should be actively engaged on existing policies regularly. The next element of the model is **scheduled training**. Both new and existing staff should occasionally – during the course of the year – be exposed to training on common areas of mutuality such as **accountability**, **empowerment**, and **communication**, that is how best to communicate issues of common concern.

Finally, simply because the silo mentality is more comfortable with little or no interaction with others, a kind of apartness, that is **Me** versus **You**, the logical thinking is that conscious and regulated scheduled training in accountability, empowerment, and communication is likely to lead to the **Us** mentality, a stage where **interaction/collaboration/interface** would be **harmonized**. Obviously, this would not be an overnight wonder, but takes effort, motivation, and willingness to embrace positive change.

CONCLUSION

To conclude, grappling with unsatisfactory interface is a pointless engagement if stakeholders do no more than talk intelligently about it. Silos cannot be wished away. Taking action, that is, positive action premised on research evidence is the most ideal route. Application of a good model could lead the institution serving as the case study, and indeed any comparable institution, anywhere in the world, to this best-case scenario, where organizational silos interact with one another. More importantly, the Model, which is the outcome of research, is a major step in enhancing two elements in the organisation's Operational Plan, namely, improving corporate governance, and improving leadership.

While generalizability of the study, its findings, and the proposed model may not be a given, there can be no doubt that there is trustworthiness about them. Such trustworthiness can be extrapolated to comparable educational institutions, and to any other workplace. One is yet to come across a company or organization where interaction is smooth-sailing; where departments all sing a harmonious tune together; or where communication is always perfect and to the satisfaction of stakeholders. The findings, conclusions, and recommendations emanating from the present study have potential for cross-cultural transfer.

The conclusive Figure 4 demonstrates that in the situation where a new programme is planned, a collaborative approach by stakeholder departments can break silos. The choreographed interaction on a particular project, e.g. starting a new degree programme in the institution, eventuates in the handing over of a jointly owned product to the Chief Executive Officer of the organization, the Vice Chancellor.

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