

**The Seventh Pan Commonwealth Forum**

***Open Learning for Development: Towards Empowerment and Transformation***

Submission of Paper for Presentation

By

Author:

**Dr. Jeanette M. Bartley-Bryan**  
[jmbartley@utech.edu.jm](mailto:jmbartley@utech.edu.jm)

Associate Vice President,  
Open & Distance Learning,  
University of Technology, Jamaica  
<http://www.utech.edu.jm>

Presentation Title

***The UTech CommUniversity Initiative for Developing Vocational Literacy Skills  
and Core Values through Flexible Learning:  
Challenges & Success Factors***

August 8, 2013

## INTRODUCTION

The concept of the UTech CommUniversity relates to a specific outreach intervention to create local community-university networks for collaborative learning, exchange of ideas and knowledge for enhancement of life and prosperity, through partnerships with public, private agencies, and individuals (Adapted from Ricker, 2010). The primary role of University of Technology, Jamaica (UTech) within this network is to facilitate access to a wide range of educational resources and information technologies, so that the communities may explore options and accept collective responsibility for implementation, through participatory learning and action.

### Contextual Background

The UTech CommUniversity initiative originated with the historical mandate of the university to promote learning through service to communities. In 1999, UTech, formerly the College of Arts, Science and Technology (CAST), established a 'work-study' requirement, which was rebranded as the Community Service initiative, within two years of its university status. The UTech CSP requires every student to complete forty (40) hours of community service to improve the quality of life of those being served. The principle of community service is therefore a defining UTech feature, extended to participants within the CommUniversity.

UTech as the Jamaican public university, is also pursuing the vision of the "People's University" based on the charge from its first Chancellor, Sir William Morris, Lord of Handsworth, in 2000, that where people cannot come to UTech, then the University should go to them (UTech n.d). The concept of the CommUniversity is aligned to one of the UTech strategic goals for national impact, in terms of assisting local communities to build their capacities for learning, growth and development.

In geophysical terms, UTech is surrounded by several urban districts and rural settlements in valleys and on the slopes of the hills within a five-mile radius. These communities are mainly characterised as low socio-economic status in terms of unemployment, inadequate levels of education and skills training, as well as high rates of crime and violence.

For UTech, the prevailing socio-economic characteristics of the surrounding communities are of grave concern requiring sustained intervention. Even more significant are the perceived geographical and sociological barriers, which prevent free movement among residents across communities of different political orientation. The intensity and pervasiveness of these issues in retarding local and national development are untenable for UTech, which seeks to become directly involved with improving the quality of life of individuals, as part of its philosophy:

UTech is "committed to the total education of the individual as a social being and seeks to develop the whole person in terms of personal well-being and social and intellectual competence. It promotes life-long learning, personal development and service to the community".

(Extracted from UTech website at <http://www.utechjamaica.edu.jm/about/overview/philosophy.html>).

Since 2010, UTech has been coordinating its pilot CommUniversity project with three neighbouring communities, within a two mile radius. Demographic details for these communities include the following socioeconomic information extracted from the Social Development Commission (SDC) Report 2009 for Jamaica.

- The combined total population is approximately 10,224 persons;
- The average household size is 4 persons;
- Over half the population (56%) fall below 34 years, including youths (15-20 years)

comprising 12%, and emerging adults (21-24) comprising 10% and young adults (25-34 years) comprising 34%;

- There are 52% males and 48% females;
- The educational level of the heads of households is reflected as primary (52%), secondary (33%), tertiary (3.7%); other skills training (5.3%) and no formal education (6%);
- A little less than one fifth population (18%) indicate lack of employable skills.

Of significance are the concerns expressed by potential beneficiaries including twenty-two youth representatives and community leaders during a brief CommUniversity focus group session held in November 2011. These concerns relate to the psychological importance of certification to enhance self-esteem, provision of nutritional support and parenting support, impact of self-fulfilling expectations on individual performance and the overall need for self-discipline and motivation. Some disaffection, frustration and discouragement arise from the high levels of unemployment and underemployment for even those youths who had achieved subject passes in the Caribbean Secondary Education Certificate (CSEC), lack of experience and skills to enter the labour market and overall social risks associated with lack of motivation, lack of engagement, lack of opportunities and prolonged inactivity. Many youths felt that there was no place for them in the existing system. There is also consideration of the declining productivity potential to sustain communities faced with an ageing population.

### **THE CURRENT INTERVENTION: A COMMUNITY-BASED TRAINING AND DEVELOPMENT PILOT PROJECT**

This CommUniversity initiative is facilitated through the joint efforts of the UTech Community Service Department (CSD) and the Office of Distance Learning (ODL). It involves the development of partnerships with various government agencies, local corporations and international agencies to facilitate vocational literacy skills and core values training and development for the target communities.

The main imperative is to rescue the next generation from crime and violence, and contribute towards national well-being by reducing income inequalities, poverty, hunger, disease and exclusion, while promoting gender equality, health, education and environmental sustainability. These priorities for community development are consistent with several millennium development goals proposed by the United Nations (2000) to be achieved by 2015. The CommUniversity project incorporates the pillars of Learning and Earning, Community Service, and Civil Paths to Peace (non-military).

#### **The Target Groups**

The target groups are primarily unemployed adults (21-34 years), and “youths at risk” (15-20 years) who are not attending school, with a significant number as itinerant traders or “hustlers” in the informal sector. These groups comprise at least 56% of the population in the target communities. A participatory learning approach is proposed to engage, empower and transform participants from conceptualization to implementation of appropriate strategies for sustaining their socio-economic livelihood and well-being.

Within the general target groups, there are several subgroups to be identified by diagnostic testing. The recommended diagnostic instruments for discrete literacy and vocational competency aspects will be provided by the Jamaica Foundation for Lifelong Learning (JFLL) and the National Council for Technical Vocational Education and Training (NCTVET). Particular attention is directed towards the emerging concept of vocational literacy, based on the criteria for Competency Levels 1-3, designated by the Human Employment and Resource Training /National Training Agency (HEART/NTA). The intent is to distinguish the following three groups:

- Group 1 – persons who meet the criteria, to apply for immediate entry to the HEART/NTA certification programme, based on the cycle/schedule for intake and numbers to be accommodated;
- Group 2 – persons falling just below the acceptable diagnostic grade, into an intermediate level from completely literate to high school leavers, who are prepared within a relatively short period to meet the HEART/NTA certification criteria, by exposure to occupational skills training for entrepreneurship, at appropriate cognitive levels;
- Group 3 – persons who need significant support to cover basic-intermediate levels of literacy- numeracy, with exposure to occupational skills training for entrepreneurship, at appropriate cognitive levels.

The pilot curriculum design has focused on integrating basic literacy-numeracy competencies with vocational skills based on the Commonwealth of Learning (COL) model used in several Pacific countries. The core values and attitudes component also integrates basic literacy skills within the formal-informal curriculum to focus on identity; respect for and understanding of self, community and country; communication and conflict resolution, family life and relationships, healthy lifestyles and wellness.

The proposed flexible/blended learning approaches include the use of several technology-mediated formats such as training videos, mobile phones, community radio and cable television to promote dialogue on issues including family interactions, parenting, intercommunity conflict resolution, which greatly affect self-worth, self-respect and security for sustainable development. The main advantage is having options other than face-to-face format to allow for greater access, more individual and group learning resources, more participants and to alleviate barriers of distance and time, which may arise unavoidable absences. The CommUniversity coordinators will also explore potential opportunities for apprenticeship with local craftsmen and the wider corporate sector, for participants who demonstrate the appropriate aptitude/attitude. In addition, assistance will be requested of the UTech School of Entrepreneurship to guide select participants in the incubation of their own small business ventures.

### **CURRENT SUCCESS FACTORS IN DEVELOPING ODFL TVET FOR YOUTH**

To date, there have been several notable successes and target achievements for the UTech CommUniversity along with diverse challenges, which have affected the pace and overall focus of development. Some factors may not be exclusive to the youth target group, as there has been the general attempt to be sensitive to particular needs of the related age groups. The success factors include:

#### **i) Emerging local solutions**

The focus on indigenous solutions involving the participatory learning approach reflects the development of a demonstration model for replication in similar communities. Of interest is the concerted effort to build on experiences learnt from previous community training projects. Some differences would be the current emphasis on learning by doing, with greater community responsibility for the outcomes, including the need to create space for the youths to have a voice, build capacity, and promote lifelong learning.

#### **ii) Community ownership and representation**

Active participation by the community stakeholders is reflected in the composition of the project planning team, and use of focus groups to determine training groups, preferred vocational skills, core values, methodology and duration. All planning sessions have included at least

eleven representatives from the target communities, social development agency, national training agency and the university. This core team reflects great diversity in age, gender, professional status, background, knowledge, motivation and experience of living and working within the community.

**iii) Emerging technical expertise**

Most core team members have been involved or exposed to some aspect of community training, vocational training and/or formal teaching activities, although only those persons from UTech have had any practical experience with distance learning. Two young team members are involved in the leadership of the Police Youth Club and citizens' association. The core community representatives are emerging as champion-practitioners for this project.

**iv) Diverse Partnerships & Collaboration**

The type and level of collaboration have differed according to the nature and location of partners involved. Of significance is the use of the formal agencies to support both formal and informal activities within the community.

The local partners include pertinent government agencies such as the Ministry of Education, HEART/NTA, JFLL and the Social Development Commission (SDC), which provide technical guidance on quality standards and certification. Community organizations such as the church and citizens' associations also assist with mobilization, logistics and resources. The international partners include COL, which has been providing significant technical assistance in planning, curriculum design, sample resource materials and exploratory discussions regarding the use of community radio. Preliminary contact has been made with UNESCO regarding the development of a community media centre to provide training and employment, especially for the youth population.

There is also notable support from UTech senior leadership, given that the project is aligned with the institutional philosophy and vision. The CSD/ODL coordinators are able to mobilize internal resources for administrative/financial support and to invite faculty members to realize their community service mandate through this project.

**v) Capacity Building**

There has been ongoing effort to build the capacity of the stakeholder-partners through increased understanding of collaborative roles, responsibilities and skills required for implementing this pilot flexible learning programme. Preliminary feedback and evaluation have indicated several milestones including the development of a project planning framework, design blueprint, guidelines and templates, target learner profile (e.g. demographics, disposition, skills).

Several participants indicated that the group interactions and exchange of information have resulted in deeper understanding of key concepts including distance flexible learning, media choices and copyright alternatives. The link between the formal education system and technical training for practical application in the informal economy is also becoming a focal point.

**vi) Curriculum Development**

The intensive exploration to determine the most appropriate range of vocational skills for community entrepreneurship has included areas such as food preparation, carpentry/building construction, leather/craft production; repairs/maintenance of air conditioners and refrigerators, welding and plumbing, ornamental fish farming, greenhouse production of vegetables. The development of the curricula is being guided by the need/interest of the target groups and feasibility of the business plan. The NCTVET standards are embedded in learning materials for

quality assurance, to ensure consistency across learning experiences while incorporating relevant, resource-based, open and flexible methods. The facilitators/instructors to be trained within the next year include community champions, UTech students and faculty-members.

The core values curricula incorporate reflective-experiential learning through focus-groups, seminars, workshops and other interactive activities, guided by expert facilitators and professional mediators in training community leaders, mentors and teams. Much will depend on the technology-mediated learning resources to maintain the momentum outside formal sessions.

#### vii) **Use of Media**

The main drivers for using videos, DVDs, mobile phones, community radio and cable TV revolve around the nature, availability and cost of media to expand flexible access for various target groups and improve quality of learning transfer. The aim is to provide resources for lifelong learning, especially for persons operating within the informal sector to develop their livelihood. Of note is the potential community support system involving mobile phones, given the extensive use by the entire community, especially the youths.

The proposed community radio and/or cable television initiative will require professional support of UTech faculty members and students from related Communication and Applied Technology (CAT) and Electronic Engineering programmes. Recently, a CAT Director was invited to the core CommUniversity team.

### **CURRENT CHALLENGES FACED IN DEVELOPING ODFL TVET FOR YOUTH**

Several challenges have arisen during the preliminary stages of this project, resulting in delays and detours, but none so serious to derail the initiative. Tremendous lessons learnt, are also outlined below:

#### i) **Managing Partnerships and Collaboration**

There is a natural learning curve for normalizing collaborative relationships, which start with clarity of purpose, common goals, institutional commitment, defined roles and communication strategy. In this project, various partners have joined at different times/stages, creating new dynamics to be redefined with each entrant. The cycle has involved resistance, defence, disconnection and reconnection as partners move from one equilibrium to another, while experiencing internal and external changes.

#### ii) **Unavailability of expert curriculum writers for preliminary development**

Although several experts were contacted to contribute individually or collectively in developing each aspect of vocational skills and core values with literacy integration, it has been difficult to secure full commitment to the time/effort required and limited financial incentives offered. Initially, experts were invited from the university, community and government agencies to participate in a 7-day curriculum writing workshop facilitated by COL. Course outlines for two pilot areas were developed, though all experts were not able to attend fully. However, it has proven challenging to reassemble those persons to complete the development process, and to integrate multiple submissions into a single cohesive document.

Recently, two faculty experts volunteered to incorporate their contribution to this project as part of their community service focus. However their expertise is not in literacy, so additional funds are being sought to invite a literacy consultant to complete the integration process. Discussions have also resumed with the pertinent government agencies for continued assistance at this

critical stage.

**iii) Appropriate curricula design for target group**

The target learner profiles require a particular approach to integrate literacy with vocational skills for flexible learning. This approach proved a little challenging for some early team members who have worked mainly in the formal environment of the University and government agencies, or with higher literacy levels. After several trials involving individual/group writing sessions with community members, aided by sample resources and COL's assistance, a full set of materials for two pilot vocational literacy skills areas is near completion.

The core values curricula design has proven a little less challenging, given emerging collaboration with initiatives undertaken by the community churches and pertinent non-government agencies. However, the proposed design requires extensive resources and funding to facilitate the type of reflective experiential learning required, with literacy integration for flexible learning, which is technology-mediated.

**iv) Financial Resources Required**

The development of flexible learning resources for the primary target group requires a heavy outlay, which is becoming a challenge with prevailing inflation. COL has provided technical assistance for training and curriculum/material development, while the administrative and logistical arrangements are covered by the university and some community partners. Sponsorship of other budget items including acquisition of technological tools/equipment and participant support will have to be realized, within the next six months.

**v) Addressing specific youth concerns for sustainability**

Feedback from various community members, emphasize the urgent need to address levels of distrust, disrespect, disaffection, distraction and disengagement among the youth target groups. Some youths have questioned involvement in the project, given prior experiences when they felt that no one really listened to or cared about them. Others highlight the need to earn while learning. The challenge is to ensure that these aspects are appropriately owned and addressed by the community during project implementation. Recommendations include peer mentorship, coaching activities and practical entrepreneurship training and incubation.

**CONCLUSION**

After months of planning and development, with progress in some major aspects and overcoming challenges, there remains great interest by the original stakeholders. The significant milestones include the planning framework and strategic partnerships, with increased understanding of using flexible learning technologies.

One observation relates to the challenge of using conventional delivery methods to provide access to the current community groups, comprising so many youths. For this special target group, one has to sustain interest, facilitate interactions to achieve vocational literacy competencies and core values development. The flexible learning mode, with options in time and access to resources, seems better suited for most community participants. Recent discussions to fast-track the CommUniversity project include increasing local resource experts and finalizing discussions with UNESCO regarding the community media centre for the youths to jump-start earning while learning. There are high stakes for the success of the UTech CommUniversity.

## REFERENCES

Ricker, S. (2010). *New Concepts on Communiversities of Vermont*. Retrieved November 21, 2010 from <http://visionaryvermont.com/2010/08/13/new-concepts-on-communiversities-of-vermont/>.

Social Development Commission Report (2009). Extracted Sections on Community Profiles. Kingston, Jamaica.

United Nations (2000) UN Millennium Development Goals. Retrieved on November 5, 2010 from <http://www.un.org/millenniumgoals/bkqd.shtml>

UTech (n.d.) *Over 2,000 Graduate From UTech*, Retrieved November 21, 2010 from <http://www.utechjamaica.edu.jm/news/vol14iss11/>.