

# Communities of Practice in Selected Public Universities in Kenya

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## Abstract

Universities in Kenya are mandated to produce quality, specialized and relevant education. This can only work when there is a well-established platform where they share the know-how. Universities in Kenya do not have communities of practice who prosper in an environment that has well laid down strategies and policies on how to share their knowledge. The objective of this study was to find out the existing knowledge sharing enablers and obstacles in selected public Universities in Kenya. The study adopted interpretive paradigm and descriptive design. Primary and secondary data was collected through interview and document analysis. The study established that although a lot of knowledge is being generated within the public Universities in Kenya, there is a lot of hoarding where knowledge creators do not share their knowledge with others. The study proposes a knowledge sharing model that can be adopted by public universities in Kenya to develop communities of practice.

**Keywords:** Communities of practice, Knowledge Sharing, Knowledge organizations, Universities, strategies

## 1. Introduction

Tremendous growth in universities requires structures that facilitate networking and online knowledge sharing. During this economic recession where universities are supposed to be recognized as centres of knowledge, majority of them have not been able to establish a network to enable them share knowledge among themselves (Noor & Salim, 2011). Sharing knowledge can result into development of strong social capital for universities. Social capital refers to the institutions relationships with one another and norms that shape the quality of the universities' social interactions which build up to sharing communities. These sharing communities referred to as communities of practice provide platforms where problems within the universities can be identified and solved and enable universities to make informed decisions. These groups also facilitate creation of intellectual capital (Wamitu, 2015).

Universities play a major role in the development of nations' workforce and economy. Studies (Chong, Yuen & Gan, 2014; Dalkir, 2005) have that knowledge flows easily when employees view it as a public good that belongs to the organization. Ardichvili, (2002) complements this by reminding organizations that their competitive advantage is embedded in the organizations' intangible tacit knowledge owned by the workers.

There are those who view knowledge as a proprietary and a possible source of differentiation thus defer sharing certain aspects of knowledge. Supar (2012) outlines factors that are relevant to KS at Universities as:

- Information Technology infrastructure that should be available to facilitate Knowledge Sharing. This includes the network, personal computers, databases and software application
- Information Technology for collaborative technology which will allow employees to contribute their expertise in such a way that it can be easily accessed by others
- Codification which puts organizational knowledge in a form that can be easily accessed and
- Technological advances that demand the entire workforce to be connected and remain on all the time

In Kenya the twenty two (22) public universities constitute an accepted body of knowledge. These universities are repositories of knowledge and are expected to bring about an increased level of productivity. Supar, (2012) states that Knowledge Sharing lead to creation of new knowledge and acts as a catalyst for innovations. Although there is evidence that Knowledge Sharing leads to individuals and organizational growth, members of these universities still hoard knowledge (Dalkir, 2006; Tsui et al 2006). For example Universities that run the same academic programmes do not share the curricula for those courses. Individual university develops her own

academic programme. This eventually hampers the whole process of Knowledge Sharing with each university viewing knowledge as a weapon to be employed for individual advantage

### 1.1 Statement of the problem

Universities in Kenya are mandated to train, generate and disseminate knowledge. They have concentrated on knowledge management systems, innovations and technological applications with minimal knowledge of the existing tacit and explicit knowledge within their staff. They have clung on the attitude that knowledge is power without knowing who the experts are and the amount of knowledge they possess. They have ended up losing a lot of knowledge when the staff exits the university. Although some concentration has been on explicit knowledge sharing through databases, there has been minimum face to face interactions. Challenges that include lack of systems and standards, information not found where it should be, databases not easily accessible and tools to access the information difficult to use are evident. Tacit knowledge is effectively shared through networks that operate informally without obstacles that bar members from interacting. Communities of practice are knowledge sharing groups that produce knowledge by interactions and create group memories. Shared knowledge is the key method of generating value for the organization..Universities in Kenya have not established communities of practice through which staff can share knowledge that can create or change shared constructions of reality while moving universities from autonomous professionalism to an integrated sharing of knowledge.

### 1.2 Objective of the study

The objective of this study was to find out the existing knowledge sharing enablers and obstacles in selected public Universities in Kenya.

To achieve the objective, the study generated a conceptual framework shown in figure 1

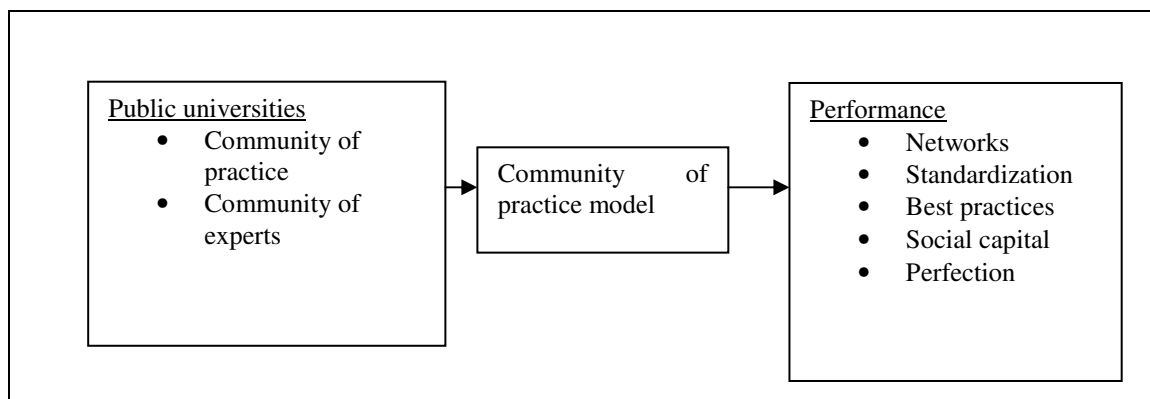


Figure 1: Conceptual Framework

The framework shows that when there are the communities of practice and communities of experts in the universities, performance within the universities will be of high level. The community of practice model will facilitate formation of networks, functions performed within the universities will attain a given standard, workers will adopt good practices in their performances, social capital will be established and generally there will be perfection in addition to intellectual property.

## 2. Methodology

The study adopted interpretive paradigm and descriptive design. Primary and secondary data was collected through interview and document analysis. First, the study clustered the nation into eight former administrative divisions from which five universities were sampled. The universities sampled included Jomo Kenyatta from Nairobi region, Rongo from Nyanza, Karatina from Central, Kibabii from Western and Egerton from Rift Valley. For the purpose of this study, constituent colleges were counted as universities since they are funded directly from the treasury and have their own University Councils and administration that govern them.

The study used probability sampling by first stratifying the staff within the various universities and then selected randomly from the subgroups. The sample population consisted of all cadres of staff from the selected universities. This is because all the staff functioned to help their respective universities achieve their mission and therefore all staff play important role. Data was collected through semi structured interviews and secondary sources. The data was organized and analysed according to the themes they addressed.

### 3. Findings

The objective of the study was to find out knowledge sharing enablers and obstacles in selected public universities in Kenya. Communities of practice are one of the tools through which tacit knowledge can be shared among different universities in Kenya. This is only possible where universities recognize the value of tacit knowledge and have built relationships within universities providing opportunities to staff within these different universities to interact.

#### 3.1 Enablers

The study therefore sought to find out the available platforms through which staff members from different universities interact with their peers. The responses are reflected in table 1

Table 1:

Available interaction platforms among staff in public universities in Kenya

Interaction platforms	Number of Respondents who use the platforms	Respondents who use the platform in percentage
Telephone	6	24
Face-to-face	8	32
e-mail	2	8
Internet social platforms	10	40
Print materials	2	8

Findings in table 1 revealed that social platforms like twitter, face book and whatsapp applications are the most popular platforms (40%) where staff from different universities interact. Print materials and e-mail were least used probably because the staff are information illiterate or the print materials are not found where they are supposed to be or, the Universities' Internet is not stable. It is assumed that in this era, majority of the staff own cell phones through which they can contact their peers in other universities. However, only 24% use phones to interact with others. This could be an indication that the staff have no links and interest with people of their profession from other universities

It was necessary to establish the kind of knowledge that was shared through the platforms named in table 1. This was because the study majorly investigated how the universities have enabled the sharing of tacit knowledge among the staff. A question was paused to the respondents to establish whether their interaction with members from other universities was meant to benefit their organizations through knowledge sharing. The respondents stated that most of their interactions involved typical questions like:

- Who sponsored...
- Who should I contact
- When will...
- Where is...

The researcher further inquired whether the universities organized forums like benchmarking to specifically provide for tacit knowledge sharing from their peers. All (100%) of the participants said apart from going to see what University X has, they stated that no benchmarking programmes were organized for peers just to visit other universities and chat freely about their work.

On whether individual universities had communities of practice within their institutions, 100% of respondents stated that these groups do not exist except when the deans are campaigning for deanship and the routine welfare groups. However, 50% of the respondents admitted that their departments organized formal trainings and invited speakers from outside their departments and even outside the university

Apart from sharing knowledge through communities of practice, the researcher asked whether the university staff are able to share any other knowledge available in other sources. This question intended to find out whether there are enablers to share information. The responses are shown in table 2

Table 2

Sources of professional and interest information for staff in selected universities in Kenya

Information source	Number of respondents who chose the source	Respondents who chose the source in percentage
People	14	56
Website	5	20
Prior material	9	39
Database	2	8
Others	2	8

Table 2 revealed that sources through which information can be shared are available although the staff members are not maximally utilizing them. People turned to others to find information related to their areas of specialization, an indication that there exist undernets not known to the university where individuals share the tacit knowledge on trust. These Undernets are little secrets that escape the gaze of the universities

The study therefore established that universities have put technological enablers like the Internet, databases and websites in place except the staff have not embraced these facilities to establish communities of practice through which their knowledge can be shared. The study also established that the universities have not set an environment to facilitate formation of communities of practice.

### 3.2 Obstacles

The researcher interviewed 25 respondents from five different universities to look into linkages between the organizational culture and knowledge sharing. To establish the level to which universities are open to and trust one another, the respondents were asked whether their universities were willing to share what is common among them like academic programmes. 100% said their respective universities were not willing. In fact one respondent stated that her university was not even willing to share her academic programmes with her constituent colleges. The respondents were also asked whether their universities were willing to reward those who shared out their knowledge and they all said that they are not rewarded and if there was such a reward then they (respondents)

are not aware of it. However, all (100%) respondents acknowledged that their respective universities reward them through promotions when they create new knowledge.

People in organizations look to their leaders for cues that are important in those organizations. The respondents were asked whether their Chief Executive officers (CEO) popularly referred to as Vice Chancellors set a day aside to chart with them freely on what he/she knows in relation to work. Apart from the usual policy routines of duty, all the respondents (100%) said their CEOs are too busy dealing with other administrative and management issues. They were also asked whether any staff members relayed their tacit knowledge through their university newsletters and they (respondents) said none did. These findings reveal that there exists hoarding of knowledge within different university which is a major obstacle to sharing knowledge

#### 4. Conclusion

The study concluded that although universities realize the importance of knowledge to their growth, the staff members strongly hold on the notion that knowledge is property because they are rewarded for what they (staff) know and not what they share. The beliefs of organizational culture to remain the champion in a given profession also contributes to the hoarding of knowledge hence failure to establish communities of practice. Again, the universities have not supported the establishment of communities of practice because they do not recognize the importance of these groups. Therefore, well established and recognized communities of practice do not exist in the public universities in Kenya

#### 5. Recommendations

The study gave the following recommendation.

1. The universities should encourage communities of practice through identifying groups with common interests
2. The universities should give their staff time, physical place to meet and provide travel support for those who will be going to meet their peers face-to-face
3. The communities of practice groups should be evaluated and recognized as part of performance review for the members and
4. The study recommends that the universities adopt the community of practice model shown in figure 2

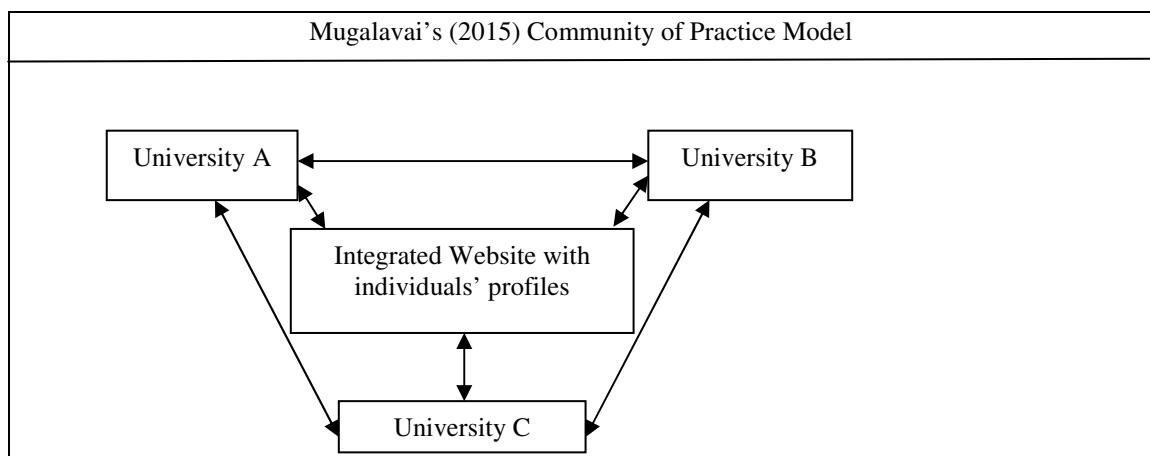


Figure 2: Mugalavai's (2016) Communities of Practice Model

Figure 2 implies that all employees of the universities will create their profiles and post them on the universities websites. The universities will appoint a community leader who will identify the groups with common interest and match them with those from other universities. All employees will belong to a group of professionals and/or a group of interest. The universities should give leeway for the groups to meet regularly and during those

meetings, the groups will regulate themselves and have an administrator to facilitate the web space and other coordination activities.

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