

Building Global Knowledge Bridges: A Student-Led Library Initiative in Nigeria

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Tags

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Setting

This case at AITM, a higher education institution in Lagos founded in 2020, highlights growth amid challenges in infrastructure, funding, and resources. AITM aims to train future leaders in technology and management, offering undergraduate and postgraduate programs, especially in technology, business, and leadership. Its flagship Scholar Program (SP) selects top students for full scholarships and expects excellence. Despite

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recent investments in digital tech and faculty, traditional resources like libraries remain limited. The case unfolds within broader African higher education struggles to balance technological innovation with conventional resources and to meet international standards amid local infrastructure issues.

Case

Folake was browsing her digital course materials on her tablet, reminiscing about her undergraduate days at Eagles University library, which she felt was a hub of global knowledge. Working late on a group assignment in the Accra breakout room, Praise shared that he missed having access to a real university library, unlike the outdated textbooks at his secondary school. They discussed how, despite AITM's global ambitions, it lacked a resource library, an essential tool for critical thinking. That night, instead of finishing their tasks, they drafted a proposal for a new AITM library to serve as a knowledge hub supporting the institute's mission. They planned to frame it as a student-led project aligning with AITM's goal of developing global leaders and enhancing its reputation.

The following morning, they sent their proposal via email to Dr. Okonkwo, the Academic Director, and Professor Mensah, the Dean of Student Affairs. To their surprise, they received a reply that same afternoon asking for a meeting. "Your proposal comes at the right time," Dr. Okonkwo told them during their meeting three days later. "While we have been busy building our digital infrastructure, I have always valued physical books and library spaces," he added. Professor Mensah remarked, "This type of student initiative exemplifies the leadership qualities we aim to cultivate at AITM. We will provide a room and offer some initial support, but the ongoing development and management will be your responsibility."

Encouraged by this endorsement, Folake and Praise swiftly assembled a team. Ngozi, recognized for her organizational abilities, joined as Operations Lead. David, with prior experience in public relations, took responsibility for communications and outreach. They developed a shared document detailing their action plan and roles. Their initial campaign concentrated on internal donations. David created digital posters, which were circulated across AITM's platforms, bearing the slogan "Build Knowledge, Book by Book."

The response surpassed their expectations. Within two weeks, faculty members donated over 30 books. Dr. Balogun, a visiting management consulting professor trained in Europe, contributed a set of business strategy books. "This is about educational equity," he told the team. "When I was a student in the UK, the library was my refuge. African institutions need these spaces as much as Western ones to prepare students for the global stage." The initiative gained further support when Professor Adichie, an internationally renowned author, visited AITM for a leadership talk. Inspired by the students' enthusiasm, she donated signed copies of her books and promoted their project on her social media channels, encouraging donations from her worldwide followers.

As their collection expanded, challenges arose. In a team meeting in August, these issues became evident. Ngozi emphasized, "We need to consider sustainability," noting, "Our intake is 50 scholars annually. How will we sustain this after graduation next year?" David pointed out another concern: "Most of our books are on business and literature, but since we're a technology institute, we also need technical resources, which tend to be costly international publications." The team discussed how to allocate their limited space and resources.

They debated whether to prioritize academic texts or include materials for personal growth. They also considered how to balance physical books with digital resources within their space limitations.

Their discussions became more intricate once external stakeholders engaged. A local tech firm, inspired by the project, proposed a donation on the condition that it primarily fund materials for computer science and engineering. This led to an internal debate over balancing financial urgency with curriculum autonomy. "We need the funding," David stated. "Technology resources are costly but essential for global employment." Folake responded, "However, accepting conditional donations might skew our collection toward an external, possibly foreign-influenced, focus. We must ensure balanced resources reflecting AITM's comprehensive vision for African leadership."

By the start of Fall 2023, their collection had expanded to 124 titles, and the library was increasingly popular among students. Requests for access from students outside their program grew, prompting questions about the library's overall scope and purpose. Praise recommended creating a formal governance structure, such as a rotating committee of current scholars, to manage the library until AITM could hire a professional librarian. Conversely, some were concerned about maintaining consistency amid changing leadership and advocated for greater administrative involvement.

Meanwhile, two promising partnership opportunities arose. RovingBooks, Nigeria's largest bookstore chain, expressed interest in supplying discounted books to the library. Additionally, Wellington Polytechnic Institute in the UK provided virtual guidance on setting up proper cataloging systems, providing a straightforward path to implementing international library standards.

A new opportunity emerged when Professor Mensah arranged for Folake and Praise to spend two weeks observing library operations at a TIM (a U.S. university library) as part of a global exchange program. This was seen as an opportunity to compare AITM's efforts with international standards and to learn best practices in digital and physical integration. However, the trip was planned for the end of the trimester, coinciding with a crucial book donation drive and final exams. The team needed to determine how to maximize the learning opportunity without disrupting their ongoing activities or causing resentment among non-participating scholars.

As Folake, Praise, and their team contemplated these opportunities and challenges, they recognized that their modest initiative had evolved into something more significant: a case study in cross-cultural resource acquisition, institutional internationalization, and the management of global exchange opportunities.

Discussion Questions

As you consider this case, discuss:

- How should Folake and Praise approach the two-week U.S. university exchange to extract maximum value given the time constraints?
- What cross-cultural principles should guide the team when engaging with both the U.S. university and the Wellington Polytechnic Institute (UK) to ensure that the imported library standards are appropriately adapted to the Nigerian academic context and to AITM's resource-constrained environment?

- What are the ethical considerations of sending only two student leaders on a highly selective, expensive international exchange program, and how should the team manage the perception of the opportunity among the wider student body?
- How can the team strategically balance the need for globally-sourced academic knowledge with the imperative to curate content that is culturally relevant and supports an African-centric curriculum?
- How might international exchanges contribute to global power imbalances? How can program designers control for this issue?
- What structure would best ensure both student ownership and long-term sustainability of the library initiative while also facilitating its growth toward international academic standards?
- What role do student-led initiatives play in building institutional capacity and driving the internationalization of emerging higher education systems? What are the benefits and potential pitfalls of this approach?
- This case involved an initiative that started as a spark of an idea and was given encouragement to grow. This can be contrasted with internationalization initiatives that start with defined goals and benchmarks. What examples can you share of emergent initiatives that grew larger than expected and had positive impacts? How does a leader recognize those initiatives and give them space and support?