The Challenges and Opportunities with advancing Co-operative Education as a Workforce Preparedness Model in a Developing Nation

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Abstract

The twenty-first century labour market, demands a highly-skilled workforce that is responsive to changing technology, product demand, and global competition (Karoly and Panis, 2004). Higher education and training institutions must therefore meet the expectations of government and industry by producing graduates, who in addition to being technically competent, possess strong higher-order cognitive, communication and entrepreneurial skills. Evidence suggests that Co-operative Education is not only a proven avenue for honing these skills and competencies but is also an established model for workforce preparedness (Zegwaard and Coll, 2012).

Nevertheless Co-operative Education programmes across the globe continue to be influenced, and more so challenged to varying degrees, by a number of complex micro and macro environmental factors to which consideration must be given.

Micro environmental factors include:

i. The strategic direction adopted by the institution’s leadership.

ii. The implementation of policies/ systems that support frequent revision of the curricula to meet industry standards

iii. The level of emphasis placed on offering practical training opportunities and;

iv. The allocation of resources to support the curricula

Macro environmental factors include:

i. The dynamics existing between the institution and industry

ii. The prevailing economic climate

iii. Government intervention and funding

This discussion paper presents the author’s perspectives on the University of Technology, Jamaica’s experience as it seeks to positively impact students’ work-readiness and ultimately augment workforce preparedness through its Co-operative Education programme.

Key words: employability skill-sets, work-readiness, workforce preparedness, Co-operative Education, University of Technology, Jamaica
Introduction

Globally, institutions of higher learning are seen as the change agents responsible for developing the long-term prosperity and economic growth of a nation by producing graduates who possess the right combinations of conceptual and procedural knowledge, are adept with the available technologies, are critical thinkers, problem-solvers, team players, innovators and who possess entrepreneurial skills (Gillard, 2008 cited in Levin, Bok and Evans, 2010).

The University of Technology, Jamaica (UTech) is cognisant of this mandate and consequently seeks to advance Co-operative Education (Co-op Ed) as a Workforce Preparedness model that facilitates the development and honing of lifelong employability skills and competencies. Further, the model allows participants to adapt readily to changing global labour market requirements, ultimately resulting in employment security and economic growth.

This paper discusses the author’s perspectives on UTech’s experience as it seeks to utilise the Co-op Ed programme to augment work-readiness.

Genesis of UTech’s Co-operative Education programme and Structure

UTech received University status in 1995 after thirty-seven years of existence. The Science (1970’s) and Engineering (1982) departments were among the first areas to benefit from cooperation with industry in providing various forms of work-integrated education experience for students.

Co-op Ed as an established institutional framework was first introduced to UTech in 2002, and eleven years later the University has embraced the concept in over thirty of its courses of study. This strategic expansion has been influenced by evidence which suggests that employers see this work readiness programme as invaluable to the UTech brand and rate UTech graduates as the most preferred candidates for employment (Hamilton, 2011).
Currently, Co-op Ed modules are administered through the Schools/Departments; however, a central Co-op Ed Unit in the Academic Affairs Division has oversight responsibilities for the implementation of the programme across the University. Each Co-op Ed module, while subject to standardised University policies and procedures, is unique to the School/Department offering same and has its own distinct features in terms of the duration of student engagement, number of academic credits awarded and the modality, that is, whether this is a core module or a School elective. Students can only select the Co-op Ed module after the commencement of their specialisation. Additionally, prior to Co-op Ed engagement, students are generally required to attend professional development seminars.

**Model 1**  Students are generally engaged during the May to August period of each academic year.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Semester 1</th>
<th>Semester 2</th>
<th>Summer (May-Aug)</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Full-time studies</td>
<td>Full-time studies</td>
<td>Full-time Co-op Ed Engagement</td>
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**Model 2**  For periods of between 8-30 weeks (One to two semesters) students are engaged in the days and attend classes in the evenings.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Semester 1 or 2</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Mon</td>
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<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Co-op Ed Engagement</th>
<th>Co-op Ed Engagement</th>
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<th>Co-op Ed Engagement</th>
<th>Cop Ed Engagement</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Classes</td>
<td>Classes</td>
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</table>

**Model 3**  Over one or two semesters students engage in Co-op Ed on assigned days and attend classes on the remaining days. There are variations to this model as the days of engagement may not be consecutive and may span the weekend.

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<thead>
<tr>
<th>Semester 1 or 2</th>
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<tr>
<td>Mon</td>
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<td>Fri</td>
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</tbody>
</table>

| Co-op Ed Engagement | Co-op Ed Engagement | Co-op Ed Engagement | Classes | Classes |

Figure 1

UTech’s Hybrid Co-op Ed Placement Models
The hybrid placement models used currently by the University have resulted from a combination of research and the Institution’s own realities. They are of three main types (Figure 1) and usually involve one rotation, with three courses of study having two rotations. While the Institution aspires to increase the number of rotations offered in each course of study, the challenge continues to be the ability of industry partners to consistently honour the number of placements required. Students have generally adapted well to these models and those engaged in Models 2 and 3 have reported that soft skills such as maturity, flexibility and time-management were greatly enhanced.

**Micro Environmental Factors shaping UTech’s Co-op Ed programme**

There are several micro environmental factors shaping UTech’s Co-op Ed programme and these along with the associated challenges and opportunities are discussed briefly below:

*i. The strategic direction of UTech’s leadership*

There are several indications that the University’s leadership has a strategic focus which involves the utilisation of Co-op Ed to attain the desired goal. These include: (a) UTech’s Vision Statement that speaks of an offer of innovative, transformational and profession-driven programmes which will result in globally competent, versatile, innovative and entrepreneurial graduates (b) The University’s Co-op Ed Policy which celebrates the Co-op Ed programme as being an invaluable avenue to maintaining the University’s vision (c) the University’s Strategic Plan (2008-2015) that highlights the creation of work-integrated education opportunities for its students as a key target and; (d) the recently approved policy on the *Attributes of the UTech Graduate* that profiles the UTech graduate in manner similar to that which was described in introductory paragraph.
Challenge

The challenge has been that UTech’s Co-op Ed programme, while supported by the University’s administrators in principle, continues to suffer from a lack of active promotion by the managers in settings that will propel the programme. Consequently, despite the best marketing efforts of the Co-op Ed Unit, over the last few years there has been little growth in the number of participating employers. The life of the programme therefore continues to be sustained by a relatively few committed industry partners. Literature suggests (Childers, McKenney & Wilson, 1998) that the challenge is not unique to UTech and further, that the most effective Co-op Ed programme demands a strong commitment and consistent endorsement by the most senior administrators within the education institution.

Opportunity

With a proliferation of literature on the topic, UTech ought to benefit from the experiences of many other jurisdictions that have developed national plans to strengthen their own Co-op Ed programmes. Recently, members of the University’s Co-op Ed Committee engaged the Institution’s Acting Deputy President in discussions regarding the operational challenges of the programme, and further, its opportunities for exponential growth both locally and regionally. Having received affirmation of support from this senior manager, the strategic focus over the next couple of months will be for the University to lead the charge in developing a National Framework for Co-op Ed.

ii. The implementation of policies/systems that support frequent revision of the curricula to meet industry standards

UTech’s quality assurance mechanisms support frequent revision of the curricula to maintain the relevance of the graduates’ education and training while meeting the needs of the dynamic
business environment. According to Thomas (2013), curricula changes are influenced by feedback provided through the Faculties/Colleges’ Advisory Committees, affiliated professional bodies, alumni tracer studies and employer surveys. Further, industry practitioners are generally recruited in the capacity of part-time lecturers in a purposeful effort to assist in addressing the “disconnect” between the curricula and industry practices.

**Challenge**

While the machinery is in place to support the frequent revision of the curricula, the identified challenge concerns the efficiency and effectiveness of this machinery. Hamilton’s report (2011) on *Market Analysis for UTech’s Educational Products* noted amongst UTech graduates, recurring weaknesses in competencies such as communication, technical writing and leadership. Vice-president of The Jamaica Employers Federation, also lamented on the weaknesses in key employability skills such as problem-solving, critical-thinking, initiative and creativity which were evident amongst local University graduates (inclusive of UTech graduates). (Daily Gleaner, 2009). There is some amount of concern regarding the responsiveness of individual Schools/Department within UTech, to implement pertinent curricula changes in general, and more specifically, those that will improve the identified weaknesses.

**Opportunities**

Hamilton’s report (2011) celebrated UTech’s favourable positions in the undergraduate market (17.5% market share), and in employers’ ranking of graduates’ work-readiness (rated 3.5 out of 5). The Report however concluded that the University needed to shift focus to ensure that:

a. the reported skills deficiency were addressed to ensure its graduates’ mobility beyond entry-level jobs.
b. its students developed global competencies and;

c. it was positioned to close the existing skills-gap resulting in the importation of foreign labour.

Thomas, the University’s Curriculum Specialist, in her recent article *Aligning Higher Education Curriculum to Changing Employer Expectations* (p.5, 2013) alluded to the fact that weaknesses in communication, leadership and management skills can and will be addressed, while facilitating a wider range of higher ordered learning targets within the psychomotor and affective domains, by means of wide-spread curricula re-design. Additionally, it was recommended that a highly interactive on-line Employment Empowerment module be created to aid in the development of soft skills thereby complementing the general work-readiness programme.

Hamilton’s Report (2011) emphasized the scarcity in local job opportunities and as a result it was imperative that students develop global competencies to equip them for overseas employment opportunities. The author’s own research conducted in January 2013 identified the top-ten global competencies required by the UTech graduate with a baccalaureate degree. Fifty advertised jobs for local and regional positions across industries were analysed and these had minimum qualifications of an undergraduate degree. The analysis (Table 1) concluded that outside of technical competence, strong communication skills and relevant work experience were top priorities for employers operating within a global environment. The ability to interface with the industry specific technology was equally important followed by the ability to interact well with internal and external stakeholders.
Table 1

Top 10 skills and Competencies required by the Local and Regional Labour Market as at January 2013

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Skills &amp; Competencies</th>
<th>Raw Score</th>
<th>As a percentage</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1. Communication</td>
<td>43</td>
<td>86</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>(written, oral and presentation)</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2. Experience relevant to job</td>
<td>41</td>
<td>82</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3. Computing /IT</td>
<td>34</td>
<td>68</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4. Interpersonal /relationship skills</td>
<td>26</td>
<td>52</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5. Analytic</td>
<td>20</td>
<td>40</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6. Planning/organisation</td>
<td>18</td>
<td>36</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>7. Leadership/people management</td>
<td>17</td>
<td>34</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>8. Problem solving</td>
<td>15</td>
<td>30</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>9. Management</td>
<td>10</td>
<td>20</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>10. Initiative</td>
<td>9</td>
<td>18</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

n=50

These competency requirements noted above, normally present a challenge for many graduates of undergraduate programmes who have never worked before. UTech’s Co-op Ed programme however, provides the opportunity for the honing of these skill-sets. To this end, UTech’s Co-op Ed Committee has recommended, and in some cases seeking to implement the following:

Revising Co-op Ed module outlines and pertinent documentation sent to employers to reflect learning outcomes that require the frequent utilisation of the above skill-sets

Seeking to extend the placement duration of some Co-op Ed modules, particularly those with less than 320 hours.

Making the Co-op Ed module mandatory for all students. In programme areas where this cannot become immediately mandatory, Schools are encouraged to offer same as an elective and;

Making a foreign language module mandatory for all students

With an unmet demand for certain skill-sets, the University intends to pursue all opportunities to expand overseas partnerships for student exchange and seek to institutionalise/regularise international Co-op Ed placements in areas where local expertise is lacking. There is also the opportunity to engage
The local offices of multi-nationals in discussions regarding the facilitation of UTech students in foreign offices to gain exposure not readily available locally.

iii. *The level of emphasis placed on offering practical training opportunities*

The Academic Course of Study Proposal Framework as well as the Teaching and Learning, Academic Quality Audit and Accreditation Policies support the formal inclusion of training components to complement the theoretical framework in the curricula. The Co-op Ed Policy also recognises the University as a Co-op Ed employer.

*Challenges*

Again, while Co-op Ed is seen as valuable to the UTech brand, the responsibility for securing Co-op Ed opportunities is predominantly that of School Coordinators and the Co-op Ed Unit. This is despite efforts to change the mindset of the University Community that securing Co-op Ed partnerships should utilise a collective and collaborative approach. Consequently, the very notion that the University is a Co-op Ed Employer has only been partially implemented because of the lukewarm response to integrating Co-op Ed students in aspects of the University’s operations in a structured and systematic way.

*Opportunities*

With the support of the Acting Deputy President, for the next academic year, the structured and systematic placement of Co-op Ed students across campuses will commence in response to the notion of the University as a Co-op Ed employer.

Additionally, the Co-op Ed Committee intends to seek out opportunities for dovetailing the University’s Earn and Study Programme into the Co-op Ed programme. The Earn and Study Programme supports students with financial needs who apply to the programme by randomly assigning
them to assist in various Departments across the University. The adoption of a more structured approach will result in students benefitting from being placed in areas that will further augment their academic programmes, while being paid.

**iv. The allocation of resources to support the curricula**

Issues of resource allocation to support Co-op Ed programmes have convincingly been the biggest concern in many jurisdictions and have consequently generated much discussion amongst Co-op Ed practitioners (Sovilla and Varty, 2011, p.15).

*Challenges*

The challenges associated with resource constraints are far greater for UTech since there is no federal funding. The programme operates on tight budget financed mainly by student fees for the respective Co-op Ed modules. And although the programme is lauded by employers, resource limitations have compromised the quality of the programme in several areas. The decentralised Co-op Ed model used by the University further restricts the equitable allocation of the scarce resources. Inadequate administrative and academic support have impacted negatively on namely the Institution’s communication with industry partners, Coordinators/lecturers’ conduct of site visits and proper management of Co-op Ed data. Additionally, budgetary constraints have retarded the Unit’s marketing plans in important areas such as the hosting of Co-op Ed Fairs, Symposium, employers’ recognition and employers’ workshops.

*Opportunities*

There is currently a move to centralise the administrative functions of Co-op Ed within the University. Additionally it is proposed that a percentage of the Co-op Ed module fees be allocated to the Unit to support its centralised functions.
Such a move is predicted to facilitate a more efficient utilisation of resources which will result in better control over areas of communication, documentation and training for stakeholders. Research capabilities would also be enhanced. School Coordinators, who previously carried administrative functions, would now be able to focus on improving the academic components of the programme such as greater attention to students’ preparation for the experience and increased supervision of students while on placement, thereby potentially maximising on the overall stakeholders’ experience.

Finally, the Co-op Ed Unit is being led to explore further the use of technology to facilitate online supervision of Co-op Ed students while on placement as well as facilitate timely communication with employers regarding student project assignments, and employer workshops. According to Lazarus et.al (2011), video conferencing facilities such as Skype and ooVoo would prove useful in this regard. The cost saving benefits must also be appreciated.

**Macro Environmental Factors shaping UTech’s Co-op Ed programme**

Macro environmental factors play an equally important role in shaping UTech’s Co-op Ed programme, and these along with the associated challenges and opportunities are discussed briefly below:

1. *The dynamics existing between the UTech and industry*

   According to Murthy and Oliver (1985), UTech’s cooperation with industry is as old as the institution itself. It spans a wide sphere and encapsulates research collaborations, communication and advisory linkages with professional bodies, funding and developmental co-operations, consultancy services, employers’ participation in the University’s mentorship programme, and of course, industry engagement in the University’s Co-op Ed programme. Needless to say, although these extensive
Collaborative linkages have contributed significantly to the University’s trending growth, not all areas of partnership have enjoyed the same levels of success.

**Challenges**

The author, based on her own observations, concluded that there is a lack of commitment to the programme on the part of UTech’s current industry partners. This is evidenced by their ad hoc participation which is generally influenced by the need to satisfy critical short-term employment gaps and human resource demands created by special projects. Such unstructured participation makes it difficult for the University to plan in a structured way for the placement of students.

Secondly, while there is a significant number of registered employers (approximately 700) who have participated at least once in the Programme since 2008, this does not compare favourably with the number of registered companies and businesses in Jamaica (over 10,000). This disparity speaks to the less than desired level of support for the programme despite several marketing efforts by the Unit. It also lends support to the position that the programme’s expansion depends heavily on the intervention of the University’s most senior administrators.

It must be noted too that student engagement in Co-op Ed did not automatically lead to deep-level learning (Weisz & Smith, 2005, p. 3). Inadequate communication with industry partners and lack of proper programme supervision on the part of the University and/or industry have often resulted in less than desired learning outcomes as students were not appropriately challenged.

Within the last three years, external competition for Co-op Ed opportunities has created an added burden on the Institution to place students. Further, not all students were remunerated by their Co-op Ed employers. This sometimes made placement difficult as students were not able to afford the
associated expenses such as transportation and housing that would be incurred from accepting placements with these employers.

*Opportunities*

Several opportunities exist to strengthen the relationship between UTech and industry. This position is supported by Hamilton’s report (2011, p. 10) which speaks of industry’s inclination to partner with UTech for the provision of Co-op Ed placements. The confirmation however points to the highly bureaucratic nature of creating partnerships with industry and further, the open opportunity for the University’s senior managers to capitalise on industry’s willingness to partner with the institution.

Porter (1982, p. 24) concluded that industry involvement in Co-op Ed should be treated seriously in light of the considerable amount of revenue spent by employers in training and retraining workforce when therewais a shortfall on the part of educational institutions. The author believes that in the local context, several employers are slowly realising the tremendous benefits to be gained from early training intervention by means of a Co-op Ed programme. This is particularly critical in some industries where in recent years they have been suffering from high attrition rates caused by the migration of their most skilled labour force to mainly North America. Consequently, over the past year, several organisations have engaged the University’s Co-op Ed Unit in discussions of possible ways in which their own internship programmes could be dove-tailed into UTech’s Co-op Ed programme.

The emergence of new hybrid placement models to accommodate in-semester placements have so far shown to be an opportune move as the statistics show that several students who could not have been otherwise accommodated during the May-August period, have benefitted. The School of Hospitality & Tourism Management, one of the larger Schools within UTech, is also gearing toward further
exploring a shift from its primary May- August placement period. This was after having conducted a December- January placement Pilot (this being the peak of the Winter Tourist season) in December 2012 and having received favourable responses from both employers and students.

Finally, Malone and Laubacher (2002) cited by Karoly and Panis (2004) concurred that the nature of the employment relationship has in recent times been redefined by technology, which now permits a delinking of work and place. Schools/Departments are being encouraged to exercise flexibility with this shifting paradigm as there are many training opportunities and new emerging skill-sets to be garnered by Co-op Ed students working for employers in an online environment. The perceived benefits are great as the University will now be able to extend its partnership reach to a greater number of employers within and outside of the region.

2. The prevailing economic climate

With the effects of global recession still evident worldwide, the impact on the Jamaican economy is more so amplified. Between 2011 and 2012, while there was a marginal decrease in unemployment rates in most industrialised countries, Jamaica’s own unemployment rate was trending upwards (Table 2). This was apparent as businesses were downsizing or closing operations while on the other hand, young people who were expected to enter the labour force were denied the opportunity as there were no jobs to match their level of training.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Countries</th>
<th>2011 Unemployment as a %</th>
<th>2012 Unemployment as a %</th>
<th>Percentage Change</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Jamaica</td>
<td>12.9</td>
<td>14.2</td>
<td>1.3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Australia</td>
<td>5.1</td>
<td>5.2</td>
<td>0.1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Japan</td>
<td>4.6</td>
<td>4.4</td>
<td>0.2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>United Kingdom</td>
<td>8.1</td>
<td>7.8</td>
<td>0.3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>United States</td>
<td>9</td>
<td>8.2</td>
<td>0.8</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Source: The World Fact Book
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**Challenge**

With a contracting local economy, over the last two academic years several employers have declined participation in the Co-op Ed programme claiming that they are unable to provide students with a minimal stipend. Further, placement opportunities with the remaining participating companies have being slashed by between 50 and 75%. The reality was confirmed a Co-op Ed employer survey conducted by UTech’s Co-op Ed Unit in the academic year 2010-2011 which revealed that close to 50 % of industry partners viewed the prevailing economic condition as a perceived threat to their continued participation.

**Opportunities**

One effect of down-sizing has been that fewer employees are required to take on a greater share of the workload. More often than not inefficiency occurs as tasks/projects are not completed in a timely manner. In the past, Co-op Ed students have been proven to provide critical assistance in these circumstances. It therefore behooves employers to conduct a cost benefit analysis to determine the impact of utilising Co-op Ed student-employees who, unlike their counterparts in other countries, are not generally paid a salary but instead given a stipend. It is believed that productivity is likely to increase with a simultaneous positive impact on human resources.

Secondly, and perhaps most importantly the re-training of human capital to respond to global shifts is at this point critical to Jamaica’s economic growth. According to Weisz & Smith (2005), Co-op Ed graduates when compared to ordinary graduates, are known to have a greater positive impact on a company’s productivity as well as national productivity. With new winds of change on the horizon and many new business ideas emerging from North America, Jamaica is seen as a strategic hub for the training of human resource to service plants or projects being set up across the Caribbean basin. In fact, the winds have started to reach the Jamaican shores and it is left to be
seen how well the country will respond to emerging economic opportunities available through Co-op Ed and other similar partnerships with overseas investors. Over the last year, the local Ministry of Industry and Commerce have been facilitating discussions surrounding emerging opportunities with the North American Information and Communication Technology (ICT) sector wherein Jamaica could benefit from providing the off-shore labour force. This however requires a consistent and large source of trained human resource with varying levels of technical competencies. The long-term benefit to Jamaica would be a cadre certified ICT personnel who will be able to independently operate, monitor and maintain ICT plants locally, regionally and internationally.

Finally, in the past, several UTech students have developed business ideas arising from problems identified while on Co-op Ed placements. These ideas have the potential for increasing corporate efficiency on national, regional and perhaps even international levels. The government therefore needs to create an avenue and the economic climate for these potential young entrepreneurs to expand upon and implement their ideas.

3. Government intervention and funding

Over the past decade, several countries have adopted strategic national perspectives regarding the education of their workforce. These decisions have included strengthening work integrated education programmes and infusing technology at all levels of the formal curricula in higher education institutions. Data indicated that these countries have been somewhat successful in maintaining their economic advantage in prevailing economic conditions. Australia, for example, developed a National Internship Scheme, which was spearheaded by the government. Universities were urged to adopt a more student-centred and authentic learning
approach that would “build work ready graduates with the professional skills necessary to seamlessly transition into the workplace” (Levin et. al., 2010, p.2).

The crucial role played by government for the adoption of national perspectives on Co-op Ed cannot be overstated. This perspective was adequately supported in literature by several Co-op Ed practitioners in various countries. Among them were Largin (1989) and Solvilla & Varty (2011). The latter further added that federal funding was crucial to the growth of Co-op Ed, both on the institutional and national levels. In fact, Solvilla & Varty (2011) contended that arguably the most significant force for the expansion of Co-op Ed in the United States was federal funding.

Challenges

With Jamaica’s obvious challenge of limited resources to adequately address the nation’s needs, funding of Co-op Ed is not at this time a priority nor is it likely to be in the near and medium term. Interestingly, available funds have in the past been directed toward the reform of technical and vocational education and training (TVET), a programme with very similar objectives to that of Co-op Ed, but operating at a lower level. One would therefore assume that while funding for Co-op Ed was not likely in the near or medium term, the government would not be disinclined to extending this type of funding in the future.

Opportunities

Jamaica is at a point where it needs to adopt a national perspective. Largin in 1989, provided a framework which outlined the process of a presidential proclamation in 1977 for Co-op Ed in the United States. This, he said, resulted in an exponential increase in employer participation in Co-op Ed programmes all over the United States, for the ultimate goal of national development.
The Jamaican Government needs to adopt a similar framework. In fact one strategy being employed by the University’s Co-op Ed Unit toward this goal, is the hosting of its first Co-op Ed Employer Recognition, Symposium and Fair within the next year and which will involve the participation of UTech’s senior administrators, senior Government officials including the Ministers of Education and Investment, Industry and Commerce, representatives from the diplomatic core, industry leaders, representatives from other tertiary institutions, media personnel, students and other stakeholders. The event is expected to launch the national dialogue on Co-op Ed.

There are of course other roles to be played by the government and these include:

- Government’s offer of incentives for private sector participation
- Formalising/regularising Co-op Ed placements with government ministries and other public sector entities.
- Government’s use of the diplomatic channel (Embassies and High Commissions) to gain International Co-op Ed Scholarships which would culminate in student placement in areas that would expose them to new technologies that could be economically advantageous to the country.
- Government’s review of its overseas consultancies and contracts, making provisions for a percentage of tertiary level students to be engaged in job-shadowing and Co-op Ed engagements.

**Paper conclusion**

UTech is at a strategic cross-road with respect to its Co-op Ed programme; it has outgrown its current interventions and approach and now requires a shift in thinking that takes into account the micro and macro environmental factors. The author supports Levin’s et. al. (2010, p.12) position that there are no clear answers to the challenges that an institution faces as it advances Co-op Ed as a model...
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for workforce preparedness. However, there are some fundamental considerations that will enhance its effectiveness. The Co-op Ed programme must therefore be:

1. reviewed frequently to ensure its viability and sustainability
2. flexible in its response to both internal and external stimuli as these help to shape the structure and direction of the programme.
3. adequately resourced to maximise on the desired learning outcomes for students
4. fully supported as part of a national agenda

Finally, Co-op Ed must be considered for its potentials in increasing the country’s productivity and efficiency, while enriching the University’s curricula.
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