Young Scholars' Experiences of Academic Sponsorship in China: Addressing the Gap in Student-sponsor Communication

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Introduction

Sponsorship have been described in several ways by researchers, some of these descriptions include but not limited to; education funding (Docampo 2007), financial aid (Adekalu, Imis, and Turiman 2013), and aid for education (Tilak 2008) scholarship. In this study we define the sponsorship as an agreement in terms of which a sponsor, based on a set criteria provides some financial assistance to a beneficiary, which may be government, an organization, a term, or an individuals, to enable the recipient to pursue education empowerment activity.

Even though, a number of studies have shown interest in examining the well-being of students that are on scholarship (Ngene, Garba and Kinta 2014; Adekalu et al. 2013; Carson 2010; Long 2008), yet nothing much is known about the relationship between scholars and their sponsors. Hence, this study specifically investigated that communication role play in the student-sponsor relationship. The study was guided one main research question, "How do young scholars perceive their sponsorship relationships?"

Methods

This study was designed to be exploratory in nature, using (Creswell, 2007) qualitative approach to gain a better understanding of the academic sponsorship and role that communication have on the student-sponsor relationship. Semi-structured in-depth interviews were conducted. The study participants were ten comprised of male and female undergraduate young scholars' that are currently under the Presidential Amnesty Programme (PAP) at a petroleum institute in China. Five of the scholars were males and five females. The age range of the participants was between 19 to 35 years. Among the study participants six are Christian and four were Muslim. In order to obtain an in-debt data from the scholars, it was crucial to establish a positive rapport, which was partly achieved by maintaining a natural setting with regard to the phenomenon (Creswell, 2007).

The study data analysis was done manually, and constant comparative analysis of the data transcriptions (Ritchie and Lewis 2003) was carried out to generate themes as they relate to participants' academic sponsorship experience in terms of their relationship with sponsors. This process involved identifying themes from one part of the data and testing them on another by constant checking and comparison across different participants. We found that although body of literature has not thoroughly explored this topic before in non-Western context, we then maintained themes that emerge from the data, rather than using a deductive approach.

Results

The two main themes that emerged from the data analysis were: (1) managing personal relations, (2) communication, (3) challenges of being a scholarship recipient, and (4) acceptance of the situation.

Theme one: Managing personal relations

Managing personal relations is a crucial factor to sustain productive and healthy interactions that necessitates a shared commitment from both individuals that intend to maintain a professional relationship. Findings reveal that, scholars have to maintain and manage certain individual personal contacts in the organization as a channel to convey their needs and to have information regarding their on-going scholarship. Regina had this to say:

> …It was a dream comes true to be awarded undergraduate oversea scholarship with this organization, under this programme. Although, I do always contact Mr. Sammy and Mr. Wizky) directly even before I left Nigeria for China… So, I further build on the existing relationship here in China.

Theme two: Communication

This theme is one of the commonly used in evaluating sponsorship effectiveness in monitoring audience level of cognitive effects for the sponsored activity. Some argued sponsorship however, to be incomplete in its ability to communicate detailed, proper channel-based information (Meenghan, 1999). Most respondents spoke about how communicating with their sponsors was a major challenge in the course of the scholarship programme. Johnson, a scholar from south-south, had this to say:

I usually ask myself this question that, must I have someone private mobile number before I can get any information from my sponsor? For example, this is Federal Government assisted project, we have our quarterly payment scheme, and sometime it doesn't come early as expected… I believe if there a good chain of communication put in place, someone should send a mail from the office to us here to say, please we cannot be able to pay you people early, due to some challenge do bear with us, but there is nothing like that; later maybe someone will come to say… my aunty said… my uncle said…

Theme three: Challenges of being a scholarship recipient

Some of the respondents reveal how they feel rejected as there is no level of trust between them and their sponsor, and they seems to see it as a major obstacle for them to facilitate mutual sponsorship relationship with their sponsor in the course of their on-going scholarship. Sani and Grace had this to say:

I believe people are hardly to be trust. But they need to believe our words, and be considerate to hear from us time to time, before they make attempt to hear from the school with regard issues pertaining to our academic wellbeing… because sometime school give them reports of our like excursion, but where the school need to take us to, they never take us there…

I always feel unhappy, whenever they fail to listen to us. They prefer to listen to school than us, and whatever the school tell them that is the final, and failed to understand some of the challenges we are facing here, because they always feel we are student that, we may be liaing to cook up stories...

Theme four: Acceptance of the situation

Although some of the respondents merely expressed their frustration with the difficulty in getting rightful information from their sponsor, other spoke about how they accept the situation and not to see it as distraction, because the scholars were just grateful to have the scholarship opportunity, and even to study in foreign university in the first place. The following statements represent this acceptance of the situation:

I believe many are out there looking for this kind of scholarship opportunity, but they could not find one. I am still super excited studying in foreign university… am not really bordered, when I don't hear from my sponsor, because I think of them less, even last month that they could not pay us our [quarterly stipend] due to change in government --- I still understand with them… (Elizabeth).

Discussion

In line with literature which reports a wide range of reasons why communication is crucial in a sponsorship programmes (Dean, 2002, Becker-Olsen and Simmons, 2002; Gwinner and Eaton, 1999; Meenghan, 1999). The findings from this study reveal that, scholarship students under the amnesty programme did not have direct channel of reporting and effective communication with their sponsors. Though, they did have personal relationship with sponsors, to unveil their wellbeing and awareness challenges encountered in the course of their on-going scholarship. In sponsorship programmes there are three key elements, the sponsors, the event and the beneficiary (Dean, 2002); the important for an programme is to ensure that sponsorship activities are not interpreted as being for pure economic benefits, if they are concerned about beneficiary perceptions and wellbeing (Dean, 2002).

Conclusion and Recommendations

Given that this study is a qualitative analysis, it should not be generalized to all scholarship students, though the research could not be transferable to other academic institutions. Students' sponsorship relationship varies by organization, each of which could present different experience for prospective students. The study recommends based on the findings a clarion call for sponsoring organizations to further improve on customer services that will gear towards effective student-sponsor relationship in higher education.

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