Partner network communities – a resource of universities' activities

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Abstract. The network activity is not only part and parcel of the modern university, but it also demonstrates the level of its success. There appeared an urgent need for understanding the nature of universities' network interactions and finding the most effective models of their network cooperation. The article analyzes partnership network communities with higher educational establishments (universities') participation, which are being actively created nowadays. The conditions for successful network activities of a university in scientific, academic and professional network communities are presented.

Intensification of all spheres of public education is the key priority for the Russian society and government. For solving this strategic task, the so-called "register" of external requirements, which are imposed by the relevant ministry (administrative regulator) to higher educational establishments at the national level, was made. These requirements include various external (in regard to higher educational establishments) regulations, monitoring the quality of their work through the prism of rather strict criteria of conformity. When analyzing these criteria it is easily seen that many of them, directly or indirectly, touch different aspects of social and network activities of higher educational establishments. To these we can refer the following: joint research projects with foreign scientists, various international symposia, conferences, summer and winter scientific schools, joint educational programs implementation, student and academic mobility, etc.

According to tradition, the social networks are usually considered as structural formations, stable social ties and relations which unite social actors being in communication [1]. In fact, "the network is a set of relations" [2]. By ties and relations along with communication interactions, we also mean any exchange of resources. According to R. Choisling, the network relations and interactions can be symbolically depicted as channels through which different kinds of the actors 'social activities are implemented [3]. In the future, we will proceed from the fact that a social network is a combination of formal-informal relations between the network actors, which enable the latter to increase network capital in the process of networking. Any social network is relatively useful and important for the participants from the point of view of increasing their

adaptive capacity and communicative competence, social stability and functional performance.

When trying to transfer basic network theory in the domestic realities of the universities, the researcher faces a number of well-known difficulties. For example, we need to give additional clarification to the thematic story about why actively created formal social network with the university participation demonstrates in practice such a different efficiency of network communication, despite the similarity of their structural bases. We postulate three universal principles that define the specificity and nature of the background practices of network communities in general, and high school network communities, in particular:

- a) networking,
- b) network competition,
- c) network simulation.

If the network community operates on the basis of the principle of cooperation, the implementation of this principle is the partner network community. If the network community operates on the basis of the principle of competition, it results in the competitive network community. If the network community operates on the basis of the principle of imitation, the result of this principle implementation is the simulation *network community*.

Nowadays, the notion of partnership is multidisciplinary; it is used in economics, law, political science, and sociology. Moreover, this notion in its broad sense is used to determine any business relations. When calling one of the models of universities' networking a partnership, we, first and foremost, highlight such essential characteristics as awareness, activity and openness of network actors to interaction, sharing common values, motivation to achieve

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universally valid goals, mutual trust and mutual benefit of both tangible and intangible nature.

It is noteworthy that partner relations imply development. Simple registration of network relations, sporadic interactions, as well as latent “implicit” relations are not enough for creating the network partnership. There is a need for something more, i.e., the constant exchange of network capital. In general, any network activities of an organization can be measured by two criteria: the extent of their eagerness to cooperate with other organizations (their potential partners), and the diversity of skills they acquire for this approach (Kadushin) [2]. In other words, a higher educational establishment is supposed to be willing to become a part of the partner network, and be able to enter and create such networks.

Thus, *the partner network relations* are the following:

- 1) consciously built network relations based on confidence of agents-partners;
- 2) network relations presupposing joint activities;
- 3) network relations aimed at achieving the result which is common, and desired by all network partners.

Due to the establishment of stable partner network relations, the network capital emerges and becomes a unique network resource. The network capital is of exceptional value in the eyes of the partners and is accessible only through partner relations [4]. It can include information blocks which of great importance for reaching the aims, mutually built adaptive strategies, social access codes to needed off-network resources, etc. Let us consider the main directions of universities’ activities along which the partner network relations and ties are developed more dynamically.

Academic and scientific ties, built on the network principle are not new for the researcher who studies the world of science. Moreover, the scientific community itself is built as a global network. “Intellectuals are apt to feel that some idea hasn’t entered their reality until it appears in the system of books and journals referring to each other, the system which constitutes the products of the activities of the intellectual community” [5]. Implementation of the principles of partnership in scientific and academic network communities can be possible under certain conditions.

Firstly, the activity of a network actor (a research cluster, an academic institution, a particular school of thought or a scholar) should be as open as possible to their partners. Their openness gives ground for interaction and further development of network relationships.

Secondly, each partner should wish for and have a resource potential for strengthening their own network position (theoretically – being promoted to a more prominent network position). In other words, all partners must feel a relative equality of opportunities.

Thirdly, a university as a partner should be of professional, academic and scientific interest to other actors. Here, we underline a factor of involvement in common activities.

Finally, an actor of the partner network in the scientific and academic community should be able to

maintain communication rate, because a constant involvement in forming the integrated network capital is a precondition of its network importance.

It is very important for a modern university to position itself in professional networks: leading regional establishments, high-tech manufacturing, professional guilds, and among the professionals who have achieved success in a specific field. Manufacturing enterprises and professional associations can act not only as places where students are to acquire practical skills or future employment, but also as a qualified expert community which is able to reduce the gap between the content of the university curricula and real market requirements. From this point of view, the network partnership of a university primarily comes down to building up the relations with those actors-partners who are of great importance for their professional development. It should be noted that the partnership professional networks with university involvement increasingly influence economic and social life of the region. We have good reasons for speaking about the sociality of the contemporary higher education (T. Romm) [6]. Now, let us define the conditions of implementing partnership principles in professional network communities [7]:

1). A university whose aim is to enter a network community of this type should have the status of a professional in the given field. Areas of training and specialties, the staff, laboratory equipment –all these things should correspond to economic realities, and meet the demands in the labor market. Only in this case, the enterprises and professional communities can consider the universities as interesting and promising partners.

2). An important condition of university success in partnership professional network is the range of network university involvement. The more network partners directly interact with the university, the higher its corporative rating, i.e., the extent of confidence in the professional corporation. Consequently, this university becomes more attractive in the eyes of remote actors (prospective partners). The increase in the level of confidence can be reached by different ways, but the indispensable conditions of this process are to be deep understanding of professional ethics, and observance of the rules of professional communication with partners. It should be noted that that the partner network extension is directly connected with the increase of the opportunities of the university. (graduates’ employment, professional exchange of skills, knowledge and information).

3). Professional partnership puts forward “the strength of weak ties” [8]. Due to the confidence inspired, it is the key partners who often allow the universities to use their own remote resources to which they have no direct access. The condition for gaining such a peculiar “vote of confidence” is a network aimed at participation and mutual assistance, which, in their turn, are impossible unless the partners understand the significant role the university plays in the process of exchange in the professional network. The achievement of this network position in partners’ interaction is a very important task for the university because it provides new prospects for professional development.

So we can conclude that some features of partner network communities with participation of domestic higher education institutions are like those shown above.

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