

# Forging Meaningful Synergies between NRENs and CSPs (The Case of Uganda's NREN (RENU))

## Abstract:

In the first five years of its existence, RENU was not able to operate its own network so effort was made to establish a symbiotic relationship with a then leading commercial service provider (CSP) whom a consortium of willing Ugandan R&E institutions engaged under the auspices of RENU in a first attempt at collective bargaining to get the maximum possible discount on bandwidth unit-price. The Uganda R&E institutions' bandwidth purchase consortium that emerged was in operation for about four years before ending acrimoniously in December 2013. When RENU succeeded to complete the process specified by UbuntuNet Alliance for becoming eligible for admission to the EU-supported AfricaConnect project in September 2013, thus becoming eligible to benefit from AfricaConnect, RENU embarked on establishing its own private network.

RENU's receipt of a private network operator's (PNO) license from the national regulator combined with its eligibility for AfricaConnect, created a unique opportunity for Uganda's R&E institutions to initiate their cooperatively-owned private network that would be dedicated to serving their connectivity, access and collaboration needs to empower their communities of practice and thus trigger the development of a more effective national research and education network (NREN) in Uganda.

This paper presents RENU's experience on this journey from inception, through growth, lessons learnt and the impact registered. From the failure of the initial attempt to develop a symbiotic working relationship with a CSP, on to nurturing an identifying a model for shared infrastructure access that resulted in new and viable academia/industry partnerships, then to the initiation of a dedicated R&E network that was (pre-determined<sup>1</sup>) to operate as a community-owned and community-driven network, moving on to efforts to nurture the NREN through a rapid-growth phase that resulted into operational viability and maturity. RENU then embarked on a search for ways of forging meaningful synergies with commercial service providers (CSPs) which is one of the requirements for long-term sustainability. The goals and objectives that guided the new NREN initiative, the business and ownership models adopted are explained, the opportunities that were explored, what worked and what did not work, the challenges experienced and how they were mitigated are all presented. The forging of more viable business partnerships with several commercial service providers and other partnerships that facilitated initial take-off and how they were harnessed for optimum synergy for the benefit of Uganda's R&E institutions is presented. The lessons learnt so far are also shared. Performance evaluation over the first 30 months of operating as a stand-alone network is provided in a tabular outcome to purpose review (OPR) report and the trending of unit price and aggregate bandwidth over time in those 30 months are presented. The pursuit of competitiveness, the methodology for enhancing competitiveness and the resulting impact are also reported and illustrated from a community-driven perspective for Uganda's R&E institutions, both public and private.

## Summary

This paper presents RENU's experience on its journey from inception, through growth, lessons learnt and the impact registered. From failure of the initial attempt at a symbiotic working relationship with a CSP, onto identifying and nurturing a viable model for shared infrastructure access, that resulted in new and vibrant academia/industry partnerships, onward to the initiation of a dedicated R&E network that was (pre-determined\*) to operate as a community-owned and community-driven network, moving on to efforts to nurture the NREN through a rapid-growth phase that resulted into operational viability and maturity. RENU then embarked on a search for ways of forging meaningful synergies with commercial service providers (CSPs) which is one of the requirements for long-term sustainability.

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