



INTERNATIONALISATION IN HIGHER EDUCATION: CHALLENGES FOR RESEARCH COLLABORATION FOR ACADEMICS IN DEVELOPING COUNTRIES (ZIMBABWE)



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ABSTRACT

Recently, the academic profession has come under great pressure to transform in the way it does in business moving from the predominantly collegial to a managerialist model (Kogan and Teichler, 2007). With the advent of managerialism, universities have grown into large bureaucratic structures with professional managers (Kogan and Teichler, 2007). These changes tend to affect academics in certain ways, for example through growing internationalization, change in management style and the aspect of relevance (Kogan and Teichler, 2007). With relevance came a rise of industry oriented research (Altbach, 2005). In the views of Altbach (2005) government, business, industry and labour came to play an important part in academic governance. University researchers are to join forces with researchers or practitioners in industry and business who are the providers of research funds (Altbach, 2005). The academic profession in developing countries faces the most difficult of challenges in order to maintain a viable academic culture under worsening conditions of service and fewer established norms (Altbach, 2005). Increasing internationalization may come in as an advantage in terms of information exchange at a global level as well as the rich diversity of students and ideas. However in developing countries like Zimbabwe where, access to information communication technology is still a privilege of the few, a majority of lecturers both female and male struggle to get access to information exchange and global networking. This paper explores the challenges experienced by academics in Zimbabwe with respect to partnership formation and international research collaborations. It adopts a qualitative methodology where focus groups and individual interviews were conducted with purposively sampled lecturers from three state universities in Zimbabwe. Some of the major findings were that collaborative research was hindered by funding; at times partners who bring in funds want to control the research proceedings, political challenges, language and cultural differences, poorly developed ICT infrastructure. Positives accruing from collaboration include creating of research networks, intellectual growth, access to funds and resources and sharing of skills. Recommendations include early face to face meetings of collaborating partners, the creation of research funds by the state to support academic' research efforts, academics taking advantage of conferences held in own countries to network and institutions creating enabling environments for collaborative research.

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Contribution/ Originality

This study is one of the very few studies carried out in Zimbabwe on the experiences of academics and the challenges they encounter in their research collaboration with international counterparts. It highlights for the first time previously unknown challenges local academic experience with externally funded research collaboration.

1. INTRODUCTION

It has been advanced that research has always been and to a large extent a global enterprise (Anderson, 2011). In that respect, international research collaborations are an inevitable consequence of research. There are both advantages and disadvantages for international research collaboration. This paper sought to address the following two questions: 1. What are the challenges of international collaborative research? 2. How do collaborative partners benefit from international collaborative research? The paper unfolds as follows: First and foremost, a brief literature review with respect to the nature of collaborative research will be given. This will be followed by the methodology which spells out how the research was carried out. The results section follows after the methodology and concentrates on the challenges that are met in international research collaboration by researchers in developing countries. Towards the end, the paper provides the conclusions as well as gives recommendations arising from the study.

2. LITERATURE REVIEW

There are divergent views on the meaning of Collaborative research (Hu and Racherla, 2008). Most of the definitions are premised on the term collaboration. Amabile *et al.* (2001) define collaboration as “individuals who differ in notable ways sharing information and working toward a particular purpose”, while Jassawalla and Sashtal (1998) view collaboration as “the coming together of diverse interests and people to achieve a common purpose via interactions, information sharing, and coordination of activities”. Basing on the meaning of collaboration, collaborative research can be conceived as a special form of collaboration, undertaken for the purpose of generation of knowledge through the process of enquiry. Morrison *et al.* (2003) identifies two forms of collaborative research – namely horizontal and vertical collaboration. Horizontal collaboration is among peers, while vertical collaboration is based around junior staff working with more senior academics.

Collaborative research holds a lot of potential for the individuals involved (Bukvova, 2010). Benefits include – access to expertise (Melin, 2000) access to resources (Sonnenwald, 2010) exchange of ideas, especially across disciplines (Heinze and Kuhlmann, 2008) pooling expertise for complex problems (Sonnenwald, 2010) learning new skills (Heinze and Kuhlmann, 2008) and access to funding (Vanrijnssoever *et al.*, 2008).

On the negative, collaborative research has a number of challenges *inter alia* – challenges of assigning points to the collaborators, especially for scientific publications (Wray, 2006). Tension caused by challenges of assigning points may affect the researchers’ motivation (Bukvova, 2010). Other challenges include lack of clarity on who has responsibility for the results of the collaboration (Bukvova, 2010) accountability issues which may result in lower quality of research output (Wray, 2006) and high costs of collaboration (Cummings and Kiesler, 2007). There is an increased control of research and research funding by the providers of capital (Altbach, 2005). This acts as a barrier to research funds access by those academics whose subjects are not industry oriented like the female dominated social sciences, arts and education. According to Mahlck (2003) “these fields offer more individually oriented research styles and less formally organized research collaboration.” In developing countries for example in Africa, unavailability of research funds is one of the adverse factors experienced by academics in higher education institutions (Subotzky, 2001; Currie *et al.*, 2002; Wolf-Wendel and Ward, 2006). In that regard academics are unable to fulfil the research criterion for promotion (Teferra and Altbach, 2004). There have been fiscal constraints in many countries (Altbach, 2005; Kogan and Teichler, 2007). The professoriate is currently under pressure to attract external research funds as well as focusing on teaching in addition to consultation (Altbach, 2005; Kogan and Teichler, 2007).

Since collaborative research is developing into a key facet of the research landscape, and is deemed appropriate for the development of further knowledge Smith (2001); Goddard *et al.* (2010) suggest that the process of initiating collaborative research, the method by which it occurs, and the commitment of the partners are critical to successful outcomes. Stead and Harrington (2010) in Goddard *et al.* (2010) provide a guide to collaborative research as follows:

- relationships between partnership members should be strong and meaningful;
- the aims of the partnership should be specified and the collaborators should be committed to these and ready to cooperate;
- the capacities of the collaborators should complement each other;
- collaborators must have reasonable expectations of the research process and its outcomes; and
- the research process must be well organised.

3. RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

The researchers adopted a qualitative research approach in their data gathering process. This approach was considered apropos since it made it possible for the researchers to explore, probe and interrogate issues pertaining to the phenomenon under investigation. Using this approach, it was possible to generate data from the participants' emic perspective. The sample was purposively sampled and was composed of seven programme coordinators from ZOU's Bulawayo Region, five from Matabeleland North Region, three from the National University of Science and Technology (NUST), and three from Lupane State University. Data were triangulated by getting views on Collaborative Research from colleagues in South Africa (1), Tanzania (1), Kenya (1), Zambia (1), Namibia (1) and Senegal (1). This was meant to circumvent the lack of experience in international collaborative research that was evident in the initial sample.

Data from ZOU's two regions was generated through focus group discussions. The discussions lasted between one and two hours, with the proceedings being recorded verbatim. Participants from NUST and Lupane State University were interviewed by telephone, while data from external sources were gathered through emails. The data from ZOU, NUST and Lupane State University were transcribed and verified. After verification and downloading of external data, both sets of data were segmented, coded and analysed using the thematic approach.

4. RESULTS

4.1. Descriptions of Focus Groups

One focus group was composed of seven members, four males and three females. Four of the members had more than five years of university teaching, while three members' university teaching experience ranged from three to five years. One of the members was pursuing doctoral studies, while the rest were holders of Masters Degrees in their respective teaching areas. Three members of the focus group had some experience in collaborative research.

Focus group two consisted of six members, all males. All the members' university teaching experience ranged from one to three years. One member was a PhD holder, while the rest were holders of Masters Degrees. Two members of the group had some experience in collaborative research.

4.2. Bio Data of Individuals Who Participated in the Interviews

Six lecturers participated in individual interviews. Of the six, four were males, while two were females. Their university teaching experiences ranged between three and six years. Three members were PhD holders, while the other three were holders of Masters Degrees. Two of the participants had some experience in collaborative research.

4.3. Comment on the Sample

In our view, the sampled individuals' university teaching experiences, educational qualifications and research experiences were such that they could competently discuss and respond to questions on the phenomenon under investigation.

4.4. Findings Pertaining to Research Question One

A number of challenges for international research collaboration that are experienced by developing country partners emerged from the data gathering process. The following listed are some of the challenges:

Problems arising as a result of poorly developed ICT infrastructure that does not permit for example easy communication between research partners say through video conferencing, skype or internet connectivity. Activities such as video conferencing and skyping are meant to substitute the initial face to face interaction which is vital at the conceptualisation stage of the research project. In the view of [Goddard et al. \(2010\)](#) in the absence of initial face to face interaction collaborators

...may have different understandings of – and positionality within- the various national literatures with respect to the concepts under investigation. The conceptual exploration of research, its focus, parameters, underlying ethos and relevant discourse, are critical aspects of debate and resolution in the design of any quality investigation. The lack of face to face meetings to facilitate dialogue about these matters and to make key decisions about these, may prove a critical impediment to the smooth initiation of the project...

Moreover, [Mapolisa and Muyengwa \(2012\)](#) espouse the same sentiments with respect to communicating to people who are located in remote or far removed areas in which ICT infrastructural development is low, a characteristic of most developing countries. In that case, communicating to a fellow scholar in such circumstances is a challenge for collaboration. This has also been one of the author's personal experience recently communicating to fellow scholars in Myanmar remote villages.

Difficulties experienced due to different research agendas of partners. Such differences may impart the research in the following ways: the commitment of partners, the rate of research in terms of meeting deadlines, the quality of the final product and observance of ethical considerations. [Anderson \(2011\)](#) says that

Even less acceptable motives drive some international collaboration. Researchers have been known to focus data collection efforts in countries that have under-developed or non-existent regulations on the use of human subjects. Doing so can significantly ease the burdens of paperwork and compliance, but can also put research subject at risk, without access to mechanisms of redress. One hears stories of researchers who have followed the example of multi-national corporations and have sited their research where costs are low, usually because of cheap labour or access to large numbers of subjects whose participation can be bought at a low price. Corruption can be a major deterrent to international collaboration, but some researchers find it easier to work where payments to officials will hasten approvals.

Political challenges linked to government control of research agendas in certain countries. Certain research topics may clash with certain government interests such that researchers may experience difficulties in accessing the field of research during the data collection process. Sometimes researchers are referred from high office to high office to no avail in their quest to access the field for data collection. Partners originating from countries where such red tape is not the norm may be discouraged to continue collaborating under such circumstances.

Funding: Funding affects collaborative research in a number of ways, inter alia; firstly, in cases where all or most of the research funds are supplied by one of the research partners, the tendency is for the particular partner with the funds to try and play a leading role in order to influence the direction of the research relegating the other partner to the status of a research assistant. In most cases, developing country partners do not have funds support from home due to poverty and poor performing economies. Secondly, difficulties have been experienced where researchers who have a high status in research come in and because of their already established reputation are able to command funds

from funders. As such, there is the question of who controls the direction of the research project? Who controls ownership of the data, Who has a major role and say in the final research report? In short who owns the research in terms of publication? Etc.

Thirdly, the one with funds often comes with the research topic and in almost all the cases, the funder wants to own the research findings and the report, thereby short-changing the local poor country researcher.

Fourthly organizational funding differences, for example some poor country Universities have policies in which they require a local researcher who gets a funded research partnership to submit a certain percentage of the funds to their coffers. This policy is in most cases in conflict with the expectations of global research partners who instead expect that the other institution will contribute something towards their academic's research efforts.

Fifthly, publication issues in industry oriented research and requirements by certain international funders that they own the data has resulted in collaborators from developing countries at times being caught off guard when it comes to publication of their research findings thereby losing control of their intellectual property rights.

Finally, Morrison *et al.* (2003) point out that, "a lack of finance can mitigate against collaboration because partners and potential partners are unable to attend overseas conferences and workshops deemed necessary for collaborative work."

Visas and work permits: Challenges have arisen in cases where certain countries insist on the issuance of visas and work permits to foreign research partners before they can participate in collaborative research activities. There are cases whereby visitors to certain countries have been made to wait for several hours at the airports to be issued with visas. In some cases visitors are sent back to their home countries to apply and be issued with visas and work permits before embarking on their research journey. Such delays may scupper the chances of future collaborative research efforts.

Issues of multidisciplinary teams: Sometimes collaborative teams composed of partners from different disciplines may experience challenges related to approaches to work habits, writing style, methodological issues, technical jargon and authorship among others. If such challenges are not resolved amicably, they may derail the whole research project. However, if partners acknowledge that there is strength in diversity, the multidisciplinary nature of the team, may enrich the research project, since diversity may result in new insights that will have been difficult to achieve had the team been composed of collaborators from the same discipline. The challenge is achieving this ideal, requires mature and level-headed collaborators.

Authorship issues: Sometimes local developing country collaborators are caught unawares when after the research they are not in a position to have a say on who becomes the main author of a publication coming out of their research effort. Furthermore, the criteria for authorship among collaborators have to be established before hand so that all partners know what to expect. But with authorship comes responsibility, hence collaborators need to determine how they will deal with differing expertise levels of each partner. The question of who will actually write the manuscript and be responsible for the input from collaborators has to be established right from the beginning. Most participants reiterated that if the issue of authorship is not sorted out, it may impact negatively on the final product of the research as argued by Bukvova (2010).

Verification of data: Because research is done in another country, sometimes it becomes difficult to verify the data. One has to rely on their collaborative partner for reliability of the data. Participants noted that at times it is difficult to visit collaborating partners to go and verify data where the research is undertaken in more than one country due to financial challenges. Relying on the collaborative partner for the authenticity of the data may be problematic at times as observed by Anderson (2011) when she refers to a case that occurred in an Eastern country in which a researcher added dozens of researchers to papers that reported fictitious experiments in an effort to increase the likelihood of success in publications.

Exploitation of research students and postdoctoral fellows by senior researchers in institutions who are in collaborative research relationships with international partners. Students and postdoctoral fellows in research

collaborations have not been allowed to have a say pertaining to issues of the research process in which they have taken part and in fact done a lot of work as established scholars have tended to lead the partnerships and controlled the data. In effect reducing the students and fellows to mere assistants.

Language and cultural differences: The language of communication used for the research has at times presented some of the challenges. This is particularly so in cases where there has been need for translation of data analysis texts from one language to another or during the interview process. In the interview process, a questionnaire written in say English or another language may need translating into the language of the respondent. It has been claimed that the written word is historically seen to be the carrier of 'true meaning' (Neuman, 1997; Babbie *et al.*, 2007). There is however an argument that 'meaning does not reside in a text but in the writing and reading of it' and that in the reading of a text and its rereading different contexts arise that gives it new meanings which are all socially and contextually embedded. As such, it has been argued that there cannot therefore be an 'original source' or 'true meaning' of a text outside its historical context. Therefore, it has been advanced that texts can 'say' different things in different contexts, which then leads to a claim that meanings are contextually bound (Boughey and Goodman, 1992; Neuman, 1997). On the basis of the above, documents have to be interpreted in the context of their conditions of production and reading for example when analyzing a document, one would need to check whether it is a primary or a secondary source and whether it is edited or non-edited. Furthermore, it would need to be determined what status the document has, who contributed to the writing, since concrete texts differ from abstract structures of language in that they are written to do something, hence a document as a text has to be understood as being produced under specific material conditions embedded within a social and ideological system (Giroux, 1992; Neuman, 1997).

With respect to cultural differences, some of the respondents pointed out that sometimes their foreign international research partners had difficulty when it comes to the observance of local cultural etiquette during the research process. For example, the display of appropriate cultural behaviour when talking say to a married women, a chief or when one gets to an area or a homestead in the rural area. Also questions of what is food? What to do when offered a meal, after the meal and so on. These are some of the basic things but very important if one has to gather data from respondents in different social set ups than your own.

Wrong assumption of collaborative partners' research skills, knowledge and strength: Participants were of the view that there are cases where by wrong assumption of collaborative partners' research skills, knowledge and strengths creates problems. If partners who claimed to possess certain skills fail to perform certain research tasks that are in line with skills they claimed to possess that may mean that other partners will be burdened by performing more tasks. Instances were cited of teams which ended up hiring other people to perform certain tasks, e.g. employing SPSS to analyse data.

4.2. Findings Pertaining to Research Question Two

4.2.1. Benefits of Collaborative Research

Participants identified a number of benefits that arise from collaborative research. The following were the frequently mentioned benefits during focus group discussions as well as individual interviews:

Extension of individual networks: An individual researcher may have contacts with 2 or 10 other researchers in his or her field around the world who can be contacted for information or advice. Assuming that the individual collaborates with some of his/her contacts, these contacts may end up linking the individual to their own contacts resulting in a multiplier effect there by further extending the individual's network. Loan- Clark and Preston (2002) contend that:

Using the increased network capability, findings can be disseminated more widely, either formally through publications and conference presentations or informally through discussions. The chances are greater that literature review searches will produce one of the collaborating authors, increasing the likelihood that the

results of the research will be located and used by others. The findings are therefore likely to have greater impact.

Intellectual growth: Participants were of the view that collaborating with a more experienced researcher may result in intellectual growth since the experienced partner may act as a mentor. In addition cultural diversity and differences in research styles may enhance the junior partner's research skills. Even if partners are at par in terms of research experience and exposure, benefits are likely to accrue to both parties owing to differences in culture in general and differences in research culture arising from different research systems and backgrounds.

Harnessing of diverse research skills: Participants were in accord that collaboration results in the pooling together of researchers who are endowed with a variety of knowledge, skills and analytical capabilities. For an example in a collaborative team some researchers may be good in qualitative research approaches while others are conversant with quantitative approaches. Such a team will find it much easier to triangulate methodologies if need be. Referring to the complementary role of collaboration [Loan- Clark and Preston \(2002\)](#) argue that

Modern research is increasingly complex and demands an ever widening range of skills. Often, no single individual possesses all the knowledge, skills, and techniques required. In principle, an individual might be able to learn or acquire all the techniques needed to solve a particular problem, but this can be very time consuming. If two or more researchers collaborate, there is a greater probability that among them they will possess the necessary range of skills.

Access to funds and other resources: Most participants pointed out that through collaboration, local researchers had a chance of accessing funds and resources such as literature and ICT equipment assuming that the incoming partner is backed by sound funding.

5. CONCLUSIONS

Basing on the findings discussed above, the following conclusions were arrived at:

1. Participants were aware of the many challenges associated with international research collaboration affecting local researchers.
2. Most of the challenges revolve around the question of funding whereby the incoming collaborating partner harnesses the funds and other pre-requisite resources and end up influencing the direction of the research project.
3. There is limited corporate funding of academic research on the local developing country level. The few available tend to set the research agenda.
4. Participants displayed knowledge of the benefits of collaborative research although very few of them are engaged in collaborative research.
5. In most institutions there is a poorly developed ICT infrastructure to enable effective collaboration among researchers.
6. Apart from the issue of finance and other resources needed for collaborative research, some of the challenges can be circumvented by face-to-face discussions at the early stages of the collaborative research.

6. RECOMMENDATIONS

The following recommendations are advanced:

1. At the institutional level, we recommend that institutions adopt a serious approach to the funding of research activities, since research is a key result area for academics.
2. Academics must take advantage of international research conferences hosted in their own countries to foster and nature collaborative research teams.
3. Institutions need to build enabling environments for collaborative research through the establishment of ICT communications infrastructure in the form of internet connections inter alia.

4. We recommend for the setting up of a local research fund for academic research activities by governments where such a fund does not exist. Such a fund will ensure that local researchers do not rely on external funding agents in collaborative research but have also something to put on the table.
5. Collaborative partners must make efforts to meet and iron out sticky points very early in the life of the research project. Such a meeting will achieve the following – strengthening the relationship among members as well as making the relationship meaningful; specifying the aims of the collaboration, and ensuring that collaborators are committed to these and ready to cooperate and ensuring that the capacities of the collaborators complement each other.

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