

Learning from North-South¹ Research Partnerships in Open and Distance Learning

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LOOKING FOR PRINCIPLES

There is, of course, a deliberate ambiguity in the title. Whilst the presumed aim of such partnerships is to generate new knowledge in a particular field, there is clearly the possibility of multiple other agendas just below the surface. These would include institutional and individual capacity building, and in addition, a number of sensitive areas related to control, such as intellectual property ownership and institutional/individual remuneration. In the early twenty-first century, we obviously all espouse symmetry in research partnerships, as in others, but asymmetry may be lurking in unsuspected places.

Quite early in its life, the International Research Foundation for Open Learning (IRFOL), recognised the need to articulate principles which could be used to frame research partnerships. These were set down following discussions with colleagues from IGNOU and OUHK. In summary, the five principles were:

- a. Research should be designed to produce useful and applicable results for the participating institutions (raising open/distance learning quality and increasing effectiveness).
- b. Agreement should be reached between partners, not imposed by IRFOL or any other external agency.
- c. Each institution should meet its own part of the costs of research activity, with only coordination/exchange/dissemination costs met externally.

¹ North-South is used here as just one way of distinguishing between the industrialised countries which may provide development assistance, and low income countries which are frequently recipients of that assistance in different forms.

Programmes will include elements of research training.

- a. Partnerships will address new approaches to dissemination – with individual researchers linked with their own local community but also with a wider population of like-minded researchers.

(Perraton, 1999)

Writing more generally about the issue of ownership of knowledge and research in education, particularly in respect of low-income countries, both King (1991) and Hoppers (2001) have expressed anxieties about the asymmetry of agendas, arguing that the North holds sway over the 'Knowledge agenda', through the very considerable knowledge and research budgets lodged with the bilateral and multilateral development agencies and banks. They point out tellingly that partnerships don't of themselves fix asymmetry. It has often been pointed out that, in education, a very large proportion of the research studies carried out on the systems of low-income countries are designed and paid for by Northern agencies, some of whom retain the research output within their own territories, rather than publishing through the generally understood channels. Senior authorship is assigned to Northern researchers with boring predictability!

Much of the literature relating to North-South research co-operation stems from the fields of science and technology, typically taking examples from agriculture and health. International research institutes based in low-income countries have been a long-standing feature of such co-operation, as have long-term institution-to-institution links. An interesting example of reflection on these partnerships is that of KFPE (Swiss Commission for Research Partnership with Developing Countries), which, in 1998, generated a set of eleven principles to guide research partnerships. Whilst the context in which these were developed was science and technology, all of the principles can be applied to educational research. The principles are:

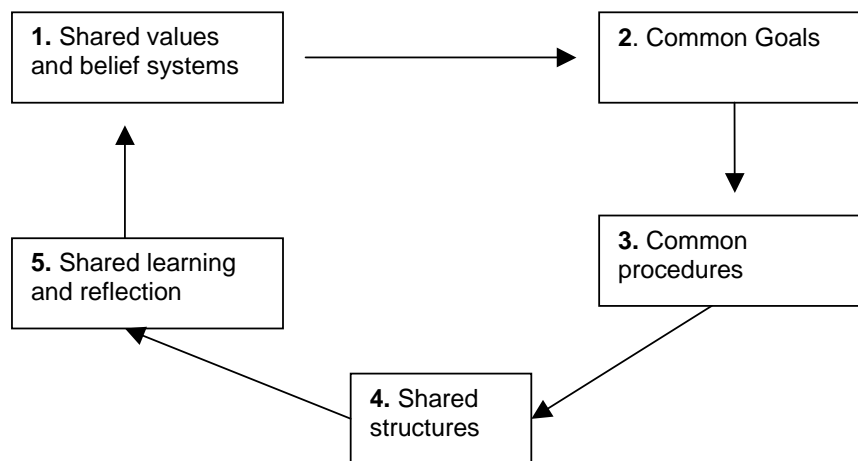
1. Decide on the objectives together
2. Build up mutual trust
3. Share information; develop networks
4. Share responsibility
5. Create transparency
6. Monitor and evaluate the collaboration
7. Disseminate the results
8. Apply the results
9. Share profits equitably

10. Increase research capacity
11. Build on the achievements.

(KFPE, 1998)

Those of us working in educational research do not normally expect to have financial profits to share, but even this principle can be interpreted from a non-financial perspective! The KFPE paper is particularly valuable in linking each principle with a checklist of questions that allow the reader to test the extent of achievement of the principle in any given context.

In the slightly different environment of co-operation with a Northern development group based in Norway, and Southern NGOs, Smith (2003) has argued the necessity for transparency in understandings of relationships, presenting the elements of partnership in cyclical form, thus:



The final characteristic relates to “the idea of a learning organisation which takes deliberate steps to reflect upon its practice, its successes and its failures.” (Smith, op cit)

Readers may wish to note the existence of a slightly different and challenging presentation of partnership principles in research titled “Charter of North-South Partners” (Gaillard, 1994), reproduced as Annex 1 of this paper.

PARTNERSHIPS UNDER SCRUTINY

In the remainder of this paper, the experience of IRFOL in working with three distinct sets of research partnerships will be discussed, using the general principles discussed in this introduction. They involve work in turn in teacher education, open schooling and effectiveness in higher education. Partners have been sited in South Asia, sub-Saharan Africa (SSA) and Cambridge. All three research projects have been largely funded by the UK Department for International Development (DFID), which clearly is a factor of some significance.

The first project (2003-2004), in teacher education, was funded to investigate the processes of student teacher support in a number of SSA countries, as programmes of teacher education become more decentralised and more school-based, and as, therefore, support-at-a-distance becomes the normal expectation. Within a one-year timetable, many of the listed attributes of quality partnerships could not be followed through. What emerged was a case study approach in six countries, each case being developed by a local researcher, normally from an academic background, working with an IRFOL team member. The local researcher was paid at international rates as a consultant, for a specified number of days of work. No particular attempt was made to engage with institutional partners, so the benefits in capacity building were limited to a small group of researchers who had already been chosen on the basis of their track record as being likely to be able to work largely autonomously. This, then, was a fairly classic short-timescale, consultancy-led, case-study approach, with few of the KFPE principles visible. Specifically, the research was designed completely in the North, by IRFOL interacting with DFID. Strengths of the design lay in the reasonable allocation of funds for in-country work, joint authorship of the final report, and joint involvement in the process of disseminating the findings.

The second study (2000-2003) was an investigation of approaches to open schooling in four countries – Bangladesh, India (Andhra Pradesh), Botswana (BOCODOL) and Namibia (NAMCOL). BOCODOL and NAMCOL had no tradition of carrying out research, but during the course of this project they did appoint research and quality control officers, and the IRFOL researcher worked with BOCODOL to create a research policy. All BOCODOL staff were introduced to research methodologies, with the intention that research should become an integral part of institutional activity. The lecturers of the Bangladesh Open School (BOS) are all academics working in the Bangladesh Open University, BOS accounting for about 50% of the enrolment of the university. The lecturers there tend to publish in their own academic subjects

rather than in fields related to distance education and the work of the Open School. The Andhra Pradesh Open School Society is essentially a parastatal, receiving its funding largely from the Andhra Pradesh state government. It does not have an explicit research function. Monitoring and evaluation of its large programme is provided by an external agency, the State Centre for Educational Research and Training (SCERT). The strongest outcomes from this research undoubtedly relate to the raised capacity of the staff of the institutions to carry out field research of good quality. The research questions in each of the four studies were articulated by the institutional staff, and the fieldwork was carried out by the same staff members, supported from time to time by the IRFOL researcher through visits and e-mail communication. Reporting and dissemination adhered strongly to the KFPE principles, as, viewed in retrospect, did the conduct of most of the research programme. One's main anxiety regarding this process is whether or not the timeframe of the project was sufficient to ensure that a research ethos will pervade the individual institutions, particularly as each has very real operational pressures to deliver an alternative mode of 'schooling' to excluded populations. Even three years of investment seems to have only begun the process of developing a vibrant research culture.

Our final example (2001 – 2004) has two dimensions. The first, a series of case studies in South Asia of the use of open and distance learning to enhance technical/vocational skill levels, has many similarities methodologically to our first example, and is not pursued further here. The major study involved engagement with four open universities in South Asia (AIOU, BOU, IGNOU and OUSL). Unlike the open schooling example, each of these universities has a commitment to research being undertaken by its academic staff, and has units dedicated to studying aspects of the performance of the university. It was with researchers generally associated with these units that IRFOL collaborated, thus being afforded the enormous privilege of access to key data sets. In each university, the focus of study was determined within broad parameters by the researchers from that university, who then carried out the work with their own team members, supported by the IRFOL researcher. Only small amounts of funding were provided by the institutions. Nevertheless, many of the KFPE principles have held up in this work. Perhaps, because this project was just one of many initiatives in these research units, it was not always prioritised for attention; perhaps it was just too small a mark on the horizon, perhaps larger financial flows to the institutions would have focussed attention on the task in hand. Too often, IRFOL staff, from researcher to me, was cast in the role of external 'nagging' agency, as we strove to meet deadlines imposed by our funding body. It is to

the eternal credit of our South Asian partners that they remain our close professional friends.

A SIMPLE CONCLUSION

My conclusion, based on the experience of these three research studies, is simple. The guidelines or principles for research partnerships elaborated by several different agencies and authors are thoroughly sensible and practical. However, set against the now familiar priorities and timeframes of those who typically fund research projects for periods from two to four years, they are likely to be hard to realise. The technical complexities of problem identification -> design -> data collection -> analysis -> reporting and dissemination, are sufficiently challenging, without having to add elements of capacity building, prioritisation within institutional agendas and insurance of an equitable division of finances. Whether or not funding agencies, with their own distinct sets of priorities (typically oriented towards providing, in the most condensed form, research/knowledge outcomes which can be related to policy issues), have the understanding or determination to address such issues remains an important uncertainty. Meanwhile, researchers in open and distance learning which involve North-South partnerships will have to exercise vigilance at all times, otherwise the perceived hegemony of the influence of the North is likely to increase rather than diminish. I leave to others better qualified to explore the nature and great potential of South-South research partnerships.

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Annex 1 The Charter of North-South Partners (slightly modified from Gaillard, 1994)

- The collaboration should be based on a strong mutual interest and both parties should have something to gain from it.
- Project proposals should, whenever possible, be drafted jointly and each partner should be associated as much as possible to the important decisions which need to be taken.
- Provision should be made in the budget for a training component and research training should, whenever possible, take place as part of a formal degree programme to increase commitment.
- Salaries should be sufficient to ensure a full-time commitment, or completed by supplementary means (e.g. research honorarium) secured in the budget.
- Transparency should be a golden rule between the partners, e.g. both sides have information on the budget allocations and how funds are being spent.
- Each co-operating group should include a substantial number of researchers (at least three).
- Both partners should meet regularly to review ongoing work and to plan future activities.
- Communication channels must be available to secure efficient interaction between partners.
- Papers should be written jointly, with the names of the authors from both sides appearing on the published articles.
- Collaborative programmes should be evaluated on a regular basis. Monitoring should emphasise project outputs, rather than inputs.

- Mechanisms should be established so that the collaboration can continue after the collaborative programme is terminated to ensure a long lifetime to the collaborative partnership.