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North-South Research Partnerships in Higher Education: Perspectives from South and North

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Introduction

North-South research partnerships in Higher Education can be opportunities for dialogue that unsettles extends the horizons of epistemological and pedagogical possibilities within our universities. This chapter looks at the theme of internationalization in Higher Education from the perspective of North-South cross-cultural collaboration and research capacity building. It continues earlier work by the authors (Barrett *et al.*, 2011, Crossley, 2011) and recent practical experience of a partnership between our two universities, the University of Buea in Cameroon and the University of Bristol in UK. So far, the partnership has involved two projects. Four years apart, both were aimed at strengthening the teaching and learning of research methods within doctoral programmes. In the process, the project challenged the dominance of an over-specified 'scientific' epistemology within one university and pedagogic relations between academic staff and international research students in the other. This chapter brings together the perspectives of researchers involved in this collaboration in both the Southern and the Northern universities.

Internationalization of HE viewed from the North and South

Much literature on the internationalisation of higher education focuses on teaching and learning. Less is written about implications of internationalization for research. One reason for this may well be, as Maringe *et al.* (2013) point out, that universities are, almost by definition, international in character and this is especially true of their research activities. Internationalisation of teaching and learning, although not new, has intensified considerably over the last two to three decades, with very visible impact on student and civic populations, particularly in Western countries. The intensely international character of research has a longer history and one that is considered less remarkable except from the critical anti-Eurocentric perspective of postcolonial and indigenous theorists (Said, 1978, Tuhiwai Smith, 1999, Santos, 2012). Their analysis powerfully shows how internationalisation can look very different when viewed from the South and North:

> We live in a globalized world but not in a homogeneously globalized world. Not only are there different logics moving globalized flows but also different power relations behind the distribution of the costs and benefits of globalization. There is transnational greed as there is transnational solidarity. Which side will the university be on? (Santos, 2012: 9-10)

The answer to Santos' question, according to Maringe et al.'s (2013) survey of 500 senior university administrators, depends on where in the world the university is located. Western Anglophone universities increasingly tend to adopt a "commercial-value driven" perspective, largely concerned with "developing a visible international presence and identity" through recruiting more international students and staff and the commercialisation of international collaborative research (Maringe *et al.*, 2013: 32). Conversely, university administrators in sub-Saharan Africa see internationalisation as

potentially damaging to their institutions, as talented individuals tend to be attracted away to universities in richer nations. In universities of the South, senior academics were more likely to express a purely academic rationale for internationalisation focused on stimulating research capacity and internationalising curricula. Similar divergent perspectives were evident in the first collaboration between Buea and Bristol in 2007-2008. The project was aimed at strengthening the teaching of research methodologies on doctoral programmes within the education departments of the University of Buea and two other African universities. For the UK institution involved, benefits related to enriching the educational experience of their own international doctoral students, particularly those from Africa, and the research income associated with the project.

Scholars, from both the North and South have written critically and self–critically on the unequal nature of North-South research collaborations (e.g. King, 1990, Pryor *et al.*, 2009), including ourselves (Barrett *et al.*, 2008, Barrett *et al.*, 2011). Since the term 'partnership' became popular within development discourses in the 1990s, North–South collaborations have been observed to serve the research agendas of Northern-based funders (King, 1990, Brown, 1992, Samoff, 2004, Olsson, 2008). Hence research partnerships, funded by development organisations can contribute towards the perpetuation of what Fahey and Kenway (2010: 629) call "empires of knowledge" centred on Europe and the USA and linked historically to European colonial empires. However, more recently some researchers have questioned the extent to which such "binary terms" (Desai, 2013: 266) capture the full dynamic of Northern-funded North-South collaborations, particularly within complex collaborations with more than one Southern partner (Holmarsdottir *et al.*, 2013a). Through critical reflective dialogue and through "sharing ideas, challenges and information" (Holmarsdottir *et al.*, 2013b: 280), researchers create spaces within which dominant agendas emanating from the North can be contested by research partners from the South (Chege, 2008; Desai 2013). Enabled by relations of trust and codes of mutual respect, these are not comfortable spaces of consensus but rather "discursive and transgressive space[s]", within which "disagreements and unevenness" are made apparent (Pryor et al., 2009: 781).

Many of these reflections by researchers acknowledge that, even when Southern partners gain some control over research agendas, complete equality between a Western lead partner and Southern partners was not achieved. Exceptions do exist. These tend to be projects that are jointly funded by partners in the South and North (Crossley & Bennett, 1997), projects funded from East Asian countries, which place a high value on cultural exchange (Chege, 2008), or projects initiated by academics seeking "to pool the strengths each one had, to learn from each other, and to contribute to education in their different contexts" (Avalos, 2008: 102) rather than in response to a funding opportunity.

However, within the literature on North-South research collaboration, the forms of inequality that concern contemporary analysts extend well beyond funding flows to include the nature and influence of global epistemological hegemony, and the fact that this often goes unchecked by academic critique (Pryor *et al.*, 2009, Holmarsdottir *et al.*, 2013a). In an analysis of the form and nature of educational research capacity in the small Caribbean state of St Lucia, for example, Holmes and Crossley (2004) draw upon postcolonial theorising to reveal how much existing research carried out there is framed within traditional positivistic frameworks that prioritises quantitative surveys and detailed statistical analysis. In doing so, they argue that this is a limiting frame of reference especially within social and cultural contexts where oral traditions and locally grounded

understanding of educational needs and priorities have much to offer educational planners and policy-makers. They reflect upon extensive experience in the development of qualitative paradigms in a diversity of low income countries (Crossley & Vulliamy, 1997) to argue that innovative qualitative developments in St Lucia could do more to stretch "the boundaries of research to include more informal, but nevertheless intellectual, activities such as work by the storyteller and the calyposonian" (Holmes & Crossley, 2004: 207) to broaden the range of what might be understood as research data and research processes. This in turn, has implications for what is considered as research capacity, what this means for research capacity building, and how postcolonial analyses by authors such as Hoogvelt (1997), Tuhiwai Smith (1999) and Hayhoe and Pan (2001) could contribute to the genuine internationalisation of educational research capacity building and cross-cultural research partnerships.

While such developments, and those reported by Pryor et al. (2009) are encouraging, Crossley's (2010, 2012) more recent work is increasingly critical of the contemporary influence of "big science" approaches to research on modes of international collaboration in the social sciences and the implications of this for the growing hegemony of expensive, large scale, statistical modalities of educational research and research capacity building. If such tendencies remain unchecked they will do much to reinforce the dominance of positivistic assumptions and values that already have a strong hold over the nature of social science research throughout much to f the developing world, and, more pertinently here, in the University of Buea itself in Cameroon. As Vulliamy argues in his 2003 BAICE Presidential Address:

> A concern for sensitivity to cultural context has been a key part of the field of comparative and international education …….such concern for cultural context also pervades sociological traditions underpinning the development of qualitative research ….The challenge for future comparative and international researchers in education is to harness the symbiosis of these two traditions to resist the increasing hegemony of a positivist global discourse of educational research and policy-making. (Vulliamy, 2004: 277)

Today the challenges are much greater, in times when preoccupations with the potential of "big data" are highly influential, and when the impact of large scale data sets and cross-national surveys of student achievement is visible on educational policy making worldwide. See, for example, work by Grek *et al.* (2009) on the growing influence of the Programme for International Student Achievement (PISA) throughout European educational systems and Meyer and Benavot's (2013) edited book titled PISA, Power and Policy. This is not to deny the role and potential of such work, and the complex forms of statistical analysis that are emerging to pioneer new advancements, but it is important that, as Furlong (2004: 343) maintains, the research community does more to maintain "a rich and diverse range of approaches to research". We argue that this is especially important, as is research capacity building from all paradigmatic and organisational perspectives, in international collaborative studies of education, where well grounded understandings of local cultural differences, values and priorities are vitally important.

Botha and Breidlid (2013) discuss this further with reference to an international exchange programme that brought Masters students from a range of countries in the South to Norway. They found participating students talked about benefits in terms of technical and academic knowledge and skills but were silent on social and emotional learning, although the researchers were confident

this had also occurred. Botha and Breidlid (2013: 274) relate this finding to the dominance, in both the global North and South, of a Western scientific epistemology that, through taking a segmented rather than holistic approach to knowledge, neglects "learning as a social experience that affects the whole person". Their analysis is influenced by the critique made by theorists adopting indigenous or feminist perspectives of the dominance of Western segmented approaches to knowledge and also by the work of Boaventura de Sousa Santos, which associates the global dominance of Western scientific epistemology with the emergence of global capitalism as a "civilizational paradigm" (Santos *et al.*, 2007:xix). Botha and Breidlid conclude with a challenge for international academic collaborations:

> Rather than echoing the message that education is about developing only one kind of knowledge and the elites and elitist practices that this epistemic dominance engenders in both the North and the South, we hope that North-South partners will take seriously Chomsky's (2010, as cited in Meyer 2010, 14) suggestion that the potential for challenging educational homogenisation is greater now than it has ever been. (Botha & Breidlid, 2013: 275)

In the remainder of this chapter we reflect on the extent to which the collaboration between the authors' has opened up a space to challenge epistemic hegemony within the practice of educational research. We do so, mindful of how our colonial heritage shapes and limits epistemological possibilities whilst agreeing with Suárez-Krabbe (2012) that North-South dialogue is necessary to the decolonization of universities in both Europe and Africa.

Education research capacity building in practice: Reflections on the Bristol-Buea partnership

The initial project partnering Bristol and Buea in 2007-8 was aimed at strengthening research methods training within the doctoral programmes of African education departments. Consistent with Harle's (2008: 86) advice that Africa-UK collaborations should be "responsive to what African humanities and social science researchers define as their needs," the initial impetus for the project came from Buea. The Dean of the Faculty Education at the time approached Bristol requesting collaboration that would offer international exposure to Buea's doctoral students. Strengthening the research capacity of students and staff aligned with strategic objectives of the Government of Cameroon, the Ministry of Higher Education as well as the University of Buea (University of Buea, 2008, Republic of Cameroon, 2009). The project was funded through the British Council funded by the UK Department for Education and Skills, as part of the England Africa Partnership capacity-building initiative. As UK leadership was a condition of the scheme, Bristol led the bidding process and consequently led on project administration, evaluation and reporting through the project's lifetime.

During the research design process, Bristol invited the Faculty of Education (as it was known at the time) at the University of Dar es Salaam and the Institute of Educational Planning and Administration at the University Cape Coast to join in the bid, having established they also were in the process of developing their doctoral programmes. This created a more complex partnership but one that contributed to developing intra-continental networks in Africa, also as recommended by Harle (2008). Since 2008, colleagues from the Universities of Buea, Dar es Salaam and Cape Coast have collaborated on further research bids and communicate regularly on academic and social issues. Buea and Bristol have maintained their partnership through a one-off contribution by Bristol staff to

teaching on one of the Buea research programmes and ongoing communication with the former Dean.

By the end of the project, it was expected that the African partners would have developed a new teaching unit as part of their doctoral programmes and collaborated in bids for further funding. Bristol expected to enhance teaching for international postgraduates, most especially those from Africa, through the participant staff's experience of visiting an African university. Most African doctoral students at Bristol are teaching or administrative university staff and return to the institution where they formerly worked on completion of the degree. Project objectives and expected outcomes were expressed in the language of capacity building mainly in the African universities. This included enhancing capacity for course design and programme development and support for leading research bids. Elements such as creating an opportunity for doctoral students to present to an international audience and enhancing supervision skills were generic to the British and African partners. However, the project design revolved around events that brought representatives from all four universities together in an African university or brought small teams of lecturers from each African university to Bristol to observe teaching units and discuss content with tutors. These events were also sites for contesting the research paradigms with their associated epistemological substance about the nature of scientific knowledge.

The largest event was a week-long 'Methods Conference' held at the University of Buea in which sessions were led by academic staff and students from all four partner institutions. It was designed as a series of highly interactive teaching and learning events, with academics and doctoral students, from each institution leading different sessions. Each session included group work that allowed for interaction across participating institutions and between staff and students of the same institution, on a more equal basis than was the norm in some partner institutions. Activities included critiquing journal articles, preparing brief research proposals, designing and trialling data collection. The Methods Conference was followed by a doctoral conference, at which research students from all four universities presented on their own research. The two linked conferences were intended as the main opportunity for international exposure for Buea's research students that had been the initial motivation for Buea seeking a partnership with Bristol. As already indicated, the conferences were conducted within an institutional context where positivist research was (and still is) dominant, and viewed by proponents as the only 'scientific' way to do research. In response to this context, and reflecting the expertise and interests of participants from Bristol and Cape Coast, the conference included sessions comparing across diverse research approaches (positivist, interpretivist, critical and creative/narrative) and sessions focused on qualitative methods. Hence, the stage was set for debate and contestation over the nature of a 'Ph.D.', the nature of educational research and acceptable/legitimate forms of knowledge within the academy. In the following sections we present a view of this debate from Buea and from Bristol.

The Buea perspective
In her welcome address to participants at the Methods conference, the Dean of the Buea Faculty of Education urged participants to conceptualize the methods conference "as a learning journey … a data collecting session that should be coded and stored for later use." This partnership experience was indeed such a learning journey for staff and students from the University of Buea. The "learning journey" provided graduate students enrolled in various academic programmes within the faculty to listen to and discuss with academics other than those of their own professors on research related

topics and issues. This was particularly helpful for doctoral students who were at the proposal stage of their degree programme as they discussed their research plans with staff and students from other universities and received valuable feedback from them.

One of the weaknesses of research in the Buea Faculty of Education and other departments in the humanities and social sciences is heavy reliance on positivist approaches. Little or no attention is paid to alternatives such as the post-positivist and interpretive paradigms. Doctoral programmes in the Faculty of Education were designed in response to acute shortages of teachers within the University and other Higher Education Institutions in Cameroon. The quality of preparation of teachers for the Higher Education sector cannot be overemphasized. A good grounding in international developments in research methodologies is critical to staff, who presently control and perpetuate research cultures, and students, who are currently or likely to become staff members. Breaking the cycle, by which academic staff perpetuate their epistemological preferences by presenting research students with only paradigmatic possibility, is critical in developing and sustaining a methodologically diverse research culture within the University of Buea in particular and the Higher Education system in Cameroon more generally. The project also helped in bringing out the importance of the contextual variable (Crossley, 2010) in shaping the research practices of students.

Currently, the University of Buea is undergoing a far-reaching transition. With other Higher Education institutions within the Central African Economic and Monetary Community (CEMAC), Buea is in the process of implementing the Bachelor's, Master's and Doctorate (BMP) system - an external dimension of the Bologna Process. As a consequence, traditional teacher-dominated instructional practices are giving way to more student-centred approaches. The Methods Conference brought staff and students together in group activities, based on the assumption that each can learn from the other. Group activities during the methods conference were both theoretical and practical. The hands-on components enabled participants to apply what they had learnt during the presentations by the various resource persons. Encouraging teachers and students to work together was not one of the objectives of the Methods Conference. However, inadvertently, it challenged colleagues from the University of Buea to work with students in groups as equals. This is not very typical of teaching and learning contexts within the university. By inadvertently challenging stereotypical instructional approaches, the project can be described as a success.

Though the project activities were very helpful, concerns were raised about their duration, and the content of some of them. It is very important to observe that all the activities associated with the project, especially the Methods Conference, were organized within a context of very tight timelines with the potential to constrain learning opportunities for all participants. The testimonials from postgraduate students and one member of staff suggest the need for more time to be devoted to future activities, rather than rushing them. However, concerns about the short duration of activities could be seen as indicative of their quality and the desire for more. Like Oliver Twist, adults will also ask for more of what is good. More time for programme design workshops, more time for auditing research methods courses Bristol and more time for conversations during the Methods Conference would have definitely been welcome.

Some of the colleagues from Buea were of the opinion that a thorough needs assessment should have been conducted to inform the design and delivery of the activities, particularly the events held

in Dar es Salaam and Bristol that only involved teaching staff. Involving staff from Buea in determining needs for their own professional development would have provided baseline data to inform the content and processes for professional development in line with principles of adult learning. Bristol had consulted lead researchers at all partner institutions in conceptualising and putting together the bid, however this communication had not extended to the wider team involved in project implementation and did not constitute a systematic needs analysis.

Bristol perspective

For Bristol staff involved in the project, the Methods Conference more than any other event challenged preconceptions and extended our understanding of teaching and supervision at the doctoral level. The first surprise was the number of Buea participants, almost twice as many as we had expected due to the participation of Masters students from Education and other faculties, and their enthusiasm. We had viewed the project as a small scale intervention restricted to one academic department and had not imagined the readiness across postgraduate programmes and faculties to debate methodology. On the other hand, as is often the case, participation from students was more consistent than that of academic staff, particularly more senior academic staff, who were inevitably juggling competing demands on their time. We encountered different ways of conceptualising the doctorate which placed greater emphasis on acquisition of expertise, handed from lecturer to student, and less on the individuality of each doctoral researcher's journey. The phrase 'terminal degree' that Buea staff used to describe a doctorate in philosophy seemed to capture its relationship to a hierarchical ordering of knowledge and status. The vehemence of opposition to qualitative research methods reminiscent of the 'paradigm wars' of an earlier era in UK, was not in itself a surprise given the orthodoxy that persists amongst policy makers (Vulliamy, 2004). However, we had not anticipated the extent to which individuals' careers and professional identities were invested in maintaining the supremacy of their particular approach to quantitative research. The debate on methodologies became polarised as individuals presented epistemologies as paradigmatic, excluding the possibility of epistemological diversity. Accustomed to a richly resourced library and electronic journals by the thousand at our fingertips, some Bristol colleagues encountered for the first time the authority of 'The Book', in this case a publication by a prominent professor used in research methods teaching (Amin, 2005).

Learning for researchers from the North was diffused to the level of the individual. Interacting with our doctoral students in the context of an African country, where the familiar roles of cultural insider/outsider were reversed, we found them more extrovert and confident. This raised questions concerning how the Bristol learning environment could disempower international students. This is an issue that we have continued to reflect upon particularly in relation to our supervision practices. We also learned from the facilitative skills of African lecturers, who created an assumption of equality and ensured that the voice of every group member, staff and student, host and visitor, was heard and given equal weight. We can now make use of the same techniques in our own teaching.

Conclusion

In this chapter we have focused on North-South research partnerships, as one manifestation of internationalisation in Higher Education. We have explored their potential to contribute towards diversifying epistemologies and the pedagogies with specific reference to a capacity-building collaboration for developing research methods teaching programmes for postgraduate researchers. Such small scale research partnerships generate opportunities for critical dialogue between

researchers and universities that expands our epistemological, methodological and pedagogical horizons. However, they are enacted within a global context where "big science" approaches to research have a growing influence on modes of international collaboration in the social sciences. The emergence of new technologies, the rise of "big data" and powerful statistical techniques, adds urgency to the imperative for researchers to create "discursive and transgressive space[s]" (Pryor et al., 2009: 781), through engaging in critical reflection and dialogue. Few detailed studies of such research partnerships exist in the available literature, although Stephens' (2009) edited collection is a useful resource. One area, for example, in which more work is needed is the ethics of international research collaboration to inform the design and implementation of mutually beneficial research partnerships and to avoid new forms of intellectual imperialism (Bond & Tikly, 2013). This could include work such as that contained in a Special Issue of the journal Comparative Education on the theme of "Educational Research in Confucian Heritage Cultures" (Evers *et al.*, 2011), and further critical analyses of collaborative practice as presented here.

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