

Best practice in North-South research relationships in higher education: The Irish African partnership model

Perspectives

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Various partnerships and international research networks linking Higher Education Institutions (HEIs) in the global North and South have emerged in the past decades, as an expression of higher education's contribution to international development, and of the need to bridge the North/South knowledge divide. Such partnerships have contributed to enhanced human and infrastructural capacity, as well as to a better integration of the Southern partners in international exchanges. Nevertheless, they have also been criticised for focusing too much on the one-directional 'transfer' of capacity from North to South, at the expense of *genuine* partnership working, mutual learning and responsiveness to need. Furthermore, the challenge of nurturing long term mutual partnerships has frequently proved to be at odds with the shorter-term timelines of most donor-funded programmes. A recent Irish-based partnership attempts to address some of these problems. Drawing on the preliminary results of a stakeholder consultation that was undertaken in thirteen partner universities, we illustrate the potential mutual benefits from partnerships in higher education that stress capacity building in both North and South. The challenges associated with the model and the strategies instituted to achieve a mutual and sustainable partnership are also highlighted.

Introduction

Historically, many philanthropic organisations and development agencies have sought to facilitate North – South university collaborations, to help tackle issues that mainly affect the global South, such as hunger, ill-health, illiteracy, conflict, human rights abuse, and environmental degradation (see Samoff & Carrol, 2002; Bradley, 2007 for comprehensive reviews of some of the major actors in this field). Within Ireland, new impetus for inter-institutional research for development came in 2006 with the launch of a *Programme of Strategic Cooperation between Irish Aid and Higher Education and Research Institutes 2007-2011*. In an earlier phase, the Irish bilateral aid programme had supported institutional linkages between Ireland and Africa in the 1980s and early 1990s via an all-island higher education collective, called HEDCO; its emphasis was on capacity building for teaching and learning, as distinct from collaborative research.

In response to an open call for proposals, eight projects across the disciplinary spectrum received funding awards, generally for three years. One such project is the Irish African Partnership for Research Capacity Building (IAP), supported by Universities Ireland, under which all nine universities (University College Cork (UCC), University College Dublin (UCD), National University of Ireland Galway (NUIG), National University of Ireland Maynooth (NUIM), Trinity College Dublin (TCD); Dublin City University (DCU), University of Limerick (UL), Queen's University Belfast (QUB) and University of Ulster (UU)) on the island of Ireland are linked in partnership with four universities in Malawi, Mozambique, Tanzania and Uganda in a pilot research capacity-building initiative, with poverty reduction as the over-arching goal. It aims to develop a coordinated approach to building research capacity both within Africa ('South') and Ireland ('North').

Notwithstanding the significant contribution of earlier North-South partnerships to enhancing research capacity in the South (Gaillard, 1994), a number of weaknesses have been identified. Their impact on research capacity building has often related more to individual capacity building rather than at an institutional level (Velho, 2002). The rationale for most North-South partnerships has also been narrowly focused on addressing capacity gaps in the South and less on the learning and building of capacity within Northern counterparts (King, 2008). North-South partnerships have also been largely managed from outside the developing countries, and their sustainability has been donor-dependent. In addition, while principles of good partnership practice have existed for decades (for example, United Nations, 1979), the actual nurturing of mutually-beneficial North-South partnerships still remains a challenge not least because the '...asymmetry between partners remains the principal obstacle to productive research collaboration' (Bradley, 2007:2).

In view of the challenges and weaknesses identified above, it is clear that there is considerable room for improvement in terms of fostering genuine partnerships where the learning is mutual and HEIs in the North and South view each other as inter-dependent actors within the global knowledge economy. Such a partnership approach is an aspiration of the IAP.

The Irish-African Partnership for Research Capacity Building (IAP): An overview

In bringing all the nine universities on the island of Ireland together with four universities in Malawi (University of Malawi), Mozambique (Universidade Eduardo Mondlane), Tanzania (University of Dar-es-Salaam) and Uganda (Makerere University), the IAP aims to advance effective policies and strategies for sustainable research capacity building within the thirteen partner universities in the areas of health and education, with gender and information and communication technologies (ICT) as cross-cutting themes. In the Irish context, the all-island character of the IAP is seen as a distinctive attribute which serves to enrich the growing inter-institutional collaborations across both jurisdictions.

The work of the IAP comprises several interlocking components:

- Five residential workshops: three in Africa and two in Ireland, at which researchers and administrators from the partner institutions meet in thematic dialogue;
- A 'foresight' exercise to identify the main health and education priorities in Africa over the next 10 years around which specific partnerships could be developed;
- The formulation of a set of quantitative and qualitative metrics to help to gauge the progress of research capacity in the partner institutions, and beyond; and
- Development of a digital repository and research register to provide a prototype online platform for African and Irish researchers working together in the future.

Another key activity of the project was a *stakeholder consultation*, designed to assess existing research capacity in the partner universities, identify barriers to future research capacity and jointly devise ways to overcome these barriers. Fieldwork for the consultation research extended over a five month period in 2008, and involved individual and group interviews with over 300 research and senior administration staff throughout all partner institutions.

Drawing on the preliminary results of this empirical research, this paper illustrates the mutual benefits associated with a higher education partnership ethos that stresses balanced capacity building in both North and South institutions. The challenges associated with the model and the strategies instituted to achieve a mutual and sustainable partnership within the IAP are also highlighted.

The IAP: A mutually beneficial partnership?

The stakeholder consultation proved to be a valuable exercise of the IAP and, arguably, for the wider development community in Ireland. It provided the opportunity for dialogue, transparency and clarification of partners' needs and expectations at inception.

One anticipated advantage of the partnership was the ability to facilitate multi-disciplinary research engagement, especially between the sciences and the humanities. There was a recognition that research needed to become increasingly multi-disciplinary, prompted by emphasis on the Millennium Development Goals (MDGs) (education, health, food and livelihood security, etc), and cross-cutting issues such as gender, environment, and human rights. It was therefore hoped that the IAP would enable scientists, engineers and researchers in the humanities to become more attuned to the need for global approaches to the prevailing challenges posed by climate change, environmental degradation, energy shortage, sustainable food

production, and disease eradication.

It was also agreed that a structured Irish-African research partnership would broaden research funding opportunities. Recognising that most development research funding agencies are interested in North-South and South-South initiatives, opportunities to engage in collaborative research activities are increasingly promising and these can be linked to development outcomes and improved quality of life. At the same time, such opportunities not only provide a cross-cultural learning dimension, but also build the capacity of Irish and African researchers as a result of joint hands-on experience.

Both Irish and African counterparts also saw the partnership as a great learning experience that would improve the effectiveness of their staff and (ultimately) benefit their students. African partners hoped to benefit from resource and equipment sharing as well as accessing Masters, PhD and Postdoctoral fellowship opportunities that might exist in Irish institutions. Conversely, Irish academics were attracted by prospects of getting good doctoral students, sharing research samples and accessing student placements where necessary. These differing perspectives indicated a certain divergence in expectations on either side, and suggest that for some partners, their participation in the network was at least partly self-interested, motivated more by what they could get out of the partnership than what they could give to it. Rather than denying the reality of this divergence, it serves rather to highlight the need to imbed capacity building programmes into the partnership, so as to enhance a shared understanding of mutuality that went beyond short-term extrinsic benefits to long-term intrinsic gains that would in future lead to own knowledge production and sharing on both sides.

Towards a mutual partnership within IAP: Prospects and challenges

From its inception, participation and engagement of the Northern and Southern counterparts in project management and implementation has been a major focus of the IAP, albeit not without challenges.

The IAP is governed by an Executive Committee (EC), on which all 13 universities are represented along with Universities Ireland/Centre for Cross Border Studies. It meets monthly, with a facility for teleconferencing. Co-chairing of the Executive Committee is shared between a Republic of Ireland, Northern Ireland and an African representative. However, it has not been possible to secure participation of all the African representatives via telephone or Skype at every meeting. It was therefore agreed that the Dublin-based Irish co-chair would, after the event, brief each of the African partners not present to update them on all discussions and decisions. In addition, the two project researchers attend every EC meeting in person, and since one of these is Ugandan, there is a guaranteed African physical presence and voice at every meeting.

Whereas all four IAP project work packages are led by Irish counterparts, efforts have been made to ensure the involvement of African stakeholders in their implementation. For example, the Foresight work package involved identification of priorities in education and health, and sought significant input from a cross-section of stakeholders in the four partner African universities. The Stakeholder Consultation work package also involved very wide consultation with African academics in the partner universities (75 from Makerere; 35 from Eduardo Mondlane; 33 from Malawi; 30 from Dar es Salaam). The Metrics work package involved consultations with the Directors of Research in the partner African institutions whose views fed into the draft instrument (currently being piloted at time of writing). Similarly, the development of the Web Portal work package drew from examples of work undertaken by African and Irish counterparts in the development of the prototype digital repository.

Two of the four workshops to-date, which have been central to the IAP's international work, have been hosted by African institutions. In addition, an African institution will host a residential 'Summer School' scheduled for March 2010 in Malawi (dedicated to skills training in effective research management). Similarly, workshop programmes are developed and delivered by Irish-African teams. This kind of sharing has been highly rated by the Southern partners as a means of fostering ownership.

Looking to the future: Is IAP sustainable?

One of the most critical issues for the IAP has been the sustainability of the project beyond the pilot phase. In the following section, we outline four strategies that have been developed as a means of sustaining the work of IAP.

Firstly, arising from the IAP's third workshop in Maputo, Mozambique, research clusters have been formed based on the priority research themes that emerged from the Foresight work package. They include three education research groups, whose membership is made up of Irish and African academics from IAP partner universities, and co-led in each case by an Irish-African team. The three education clusters include ICT and Education, School Support for Student Teachers in Schools and Assessment in Teacher Education. Dialogue is ongoing via a virtual discussion forum, with the ultimate aim of developing fundable proposals to enable Irish and African counterparts undertake research in collaboration in the future. Despite some early problems in activating the work of the health clusters, a group of individuals from the participating Irish and African universities have come together to respond to an European Union-Africa Framework call for proposals on building capacity for research in health. This group has prepared a proposal on building sustainable research capacity for safer health care in Africa alongside the World Health Organisation (WHO) and other European and African institutions.

Secondly, the Malawi 'Summer School' (March 2010) is seen very much as demand-led, and as a key milestone for the project. The Stakeholder Consultation exercise described earlier revealed that African research personnel themselves felt disadvantaged in pursuing research opportunities by a deficit of 'process-related' skills. The Summer School has the potential to confer highly practical benefits that will build the capacity of the Southern partner institutions in particular, and is being held in response to a clearly identified need to equip research officers/research coordinators from the four partner institutions in Africa with improved skills for sourcing and managing research contract awards. It will also help to promote greater articulation between academic and scholarly research on the one hand, and the wider poverty reduction, climate change, and MDG-related policy imperatives on the other. The key target audience is approximately 40 research officers/coordinators/supervisors at middle/senior management level, representing the disciplinary spectrum. Not only will they be enabled to more effectively compete for and manage research contracts, but they will also be expected to disseminate the key learning acquired during the workshop more widely within their institutions; towards this end, a manual and DVD of the training materials used will be produced after the event.

Thirdly, IAP believes that the achievement of a critical mass in all areas of development policy research will be greatly facilitated, and the outcomes of these activities will be greatly enhanced by, a more coordinated, sector-wide approach. IAP proposes therefore the establishment of a national-level platform in which all universities and institutes of technology (or other equivalent institutions) are invited to participate. This would embrace higher education institutions as members (rather than individual researchers or research groups), would seek affiliations with similar bodies internationally, and would work closely with Irish Aid and non-governmental organisations (NGOs), and with philanthropic organisations, both within Ireland and internationally. The platform would act as a stimulus to interdisciplinary and inter-institutional collaboration on research projects, and it would provide a conduit for sharing experience of initiatives such as undergraduate and postgraduate training. It is also hoped that it would act as an interface to the higher education international development sector for the governments of the Republic of Ireland and Northern Ireland, and would provide a policy development platform which would respond to the increasingly significant profile of development and globalisation issues on the political agenda. The key aspect of what is proposed is the creation of a 'system-level' approach to international development which would act a resource across the development sector and seek to provide leverage for further capacity building.

Finally, the IAP plans to engage with and deliver its key recommendations to policy makers within the HEIs and agencies such as Irish Aid and the European Universities Association (EUA), with the aim of influencing both local and international development policy.

Interim conclusions

What has been presented here are essentially interim results from an ambitious project which is still underway. Conscious of past shortcomings in North/South research relationships, we have devised principles and procedures designed to lead to more equitable, responsive and sustainable relationships. Although implementing these may not always be straightforward, one thing that has become clear is the urgent need to address the capacity of the North to engage in meaningful collaborations in development research for poverty reduction. To that end we are proposing an all-Ireland international development platform to empower this side of the equation in terms of ongoing partnerships with our existing and future Southern partners. Although North/South collaborative linkages will not alone ensure democratisation of knowledge generation, they are undoubtedly indispensable to this mission. In the longer term we will need to address systematically the obstacles to development research for poverty reduction in both the North and the South. But that is a job for another day!

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