

Developing an international higher education partnerships between high and low-income countries: two case studies

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Abstract

Many people and departments in higher education institutions and hospitals across the globe have objectives that include cross-national partnership working, internationalisation, capacity-building and sharing education and research. We find such commendable ideals at a global level in the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) to strategic plans of individual organisations from both low and high-income countries. Using a case-study approach this paper offers insights into some of the key practical issues around global partnership working. We use two case studies of a developing partnership between two separate higher education institutions from the United Kingdom (UK) and one from Nepal. To inform and guide others interested in developing global partnerships we highlight key the reasons for, considerations about, key procedures around the development of such Nepal-UK partnerships and key challenges.

Background

It is very much a cliché that the world is getting smaller but it is also very true. Globalisation through transport and improved communication technology and information technology (IT) has reduced travel time for people, good, news and ideas. Globalisation affects both the nature of world-wide problems as well as the possible solutions. It has created a greater dependency across the globe. This concept is recognised at the highest level since the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) include the importance

of developing global partnership for the greater good. Hence, SDG 17 states “Revitalize the global partnership for sustainable development” [1].

There is a strong desire to learn and improve education and research in higher education in low-income countries such as Nepal. We can regard this as a 'pull factor'. Of course, there are also strong 'push factors' for the UK (United Kingdom) partners. One key push factor is the need to bring the wider world into the UK curriculum to ensure that UK graduates are fit for the global labour market. This involves exposing UK students to different cultures, ideas and ways of seeing the world around them, through ways of living, working and learning.

There have been several endeavours to build international linkages between UK institutions and the institutions of low and middle-income countries (LMICs). However, few have described the processes of establishing such partnership, especially the perceptions and expectations of the partners in different countries. Our two related case studies analyse the development of a partnership between two UK Higher Education Institutions and one in Nepal. These endeavours open avenues for personal and professional development of staff and promote the development of friendships and strong network between the diverse communities [2]. In practice many partnerships start small, perhaps with initial exchanges of staff and students, small-scale research and teaching collaborations, and the like.

Two case studies

Case studies provide a detailed intensive picture of a single case [3], be it a situation, a phenomenon, a single organisation, an event or set of relationships. In this paper we use what Yin refers to as a 'holist multiple-case design' [4]. The Higher Education Institutions in the UK in our case studies are Bournemouth University (BU) and Liverpool John Moores University (LJMU) and the Nepal partner is Manmohan Memorial Institute of Health Sciences (MMIHS). The approaches envisaged in the partnership focus on the exchange and transfer of ideas, knowledge, skills and training. The reason behind MMIHS selecting BU and LJMU was the long-standing relationship between three authors of this paper: one member of staff from BU (EvT), one from LJMU (PPS) and one MMIHS member of staff (SBM) who have been working together for five years. EvT and PPS have been affiliated with MMIHS as Visiting Professors for nine years. The original collaboration between these academics centred on and resulted in joint grant applications, small-scale research projects, publications, joint involvement in the first ever national health promotion conference in Kathmandu in 2013 and guest lectures.

Guest lectures have not just been traditional sessions by UK academics in front of staff and students in Nepal, it also involved LJMU staff delivering online lectures to students in Nepal. More importantly in terms of a true exchange, online sessions have been both ways with MMIHS academics offering lectures via the internet to students based in a lecture theatre in the UK.

The following two sections outline the motivations and drivers to expand the Nepal-UK partnership, first from the perspective of the UK universities and secondly from the Nepal perspective.

The UK higher education institutions' perspective

UK universities, not just the ones selected for our case studies have a general set of objectives and expectations of global partnerships. The first, for many, is probably the desire to internationalise their curricula. This concept is often high on the agenda of UK universities; it is seen as important especially for local UK students. The second key issue on the agenda will often be student recruitment, i.e. to create and maintain a community of international students. UK universities also want to facilitate staff-student mobility and establish and expand research collaborations. At the same time, UK universities are aware of a range of practical issues (barriers), the need for due diligence and all sorts of potentially dangerous legal issues.

UK universities are in a process of internationalisation having started from a fairly internationalised position. Even in the two decades pre-Brexit the idea that UK higher education institutions compete globally for students and research funds was well established.

BU specific issues around this global partnership

BU considers internationalisation as an opportunity and a challenge at the same time. Internationalisation provides considerable scope for curricular and pedagogic innovations across cultures and geographies. Therefore, internationalisation is at the core of shaping global learners, nurturing cross-border research and innovation. BU aims to prepare its students to be global citizens and offer exciting opportunities for them to study abroad (Table 1).

Table 1 BU Global Planning Objectives

Bournemouth University will:

- build a strong portfolio of innovative learning and research partnerships by becoming a partner of choice;
- grow, diversify and integrate our on-campus and overseas students;
- enrich our (staff &) student experience through a range of outward and inward mobility programmes;
- develop all our students as global talent through curricular and extracurricular studies;
- engage in international activity that enhances the quality of research and its global impact;
- innovate our practice in partnership with global organisations and global alumni.

At a more pragmatic level, BU has opted to focus its international collaborations on three geographical areas: China, the ASEAN (Association of Southeast Asian Nations) countries and the Indian sub-continent. The latter area of BU's area of interest is the focus of Connect India, also referred to as its India hub (@cindiahub), this geographical focus also includes Nepal.

LJMU specific issues around this global partnership

LJMU has a long-standing interest in Nepal, especially in the health field. Table 2 highlights the key elements of its strategy for developing overseas' partnerships.

Table 2 LJMU Academic Partnerships Strategy

The core aims of LJMU strategic partnership strategy are to:

- support the life-long education of its students through proactive links with other education providers to enhance social mobility and access, whilst sustaining our relationship with alumni;
- initiate and support research collaboration with partners;
- support the local, national and global economy with innovative knowledge and technology exchange; and
- show itself to be a university that is globally engaged and embraces internationalism to the benefit of its students, staff and partners.

MMIHS: a Nepali higher education institution's perspective

MMIHS in collaboration with UK universities will devise the short-term and long-term plan with defined activities to strengthen the collaboration. Periodic visits from both sides will be planned to strengthen the activities. As a part of the planning meeting recently (late 2016) two delegates from the MMIHS came to the UK. These delegates visited both BU and LJMU to exchange ideas and to build a platform for further collaborations.

Table 3 MMIHS's expectations from a global partnership

MMIHS and UK partner universities will:

- explore the possibility for the joint collaborative research grants.
- strengthen research and teaching activities and capacity development of MMIHS staff. It is well documented that “despite over 25 years of international efforts, health research capacity in LMICs remains insufficient” [5], and Nepal is no exception to this development.
- explore the possibility of conducting joint Masters' and Ph.D. programmes in relevant areas.
- work together to explore possible exchanges of staff and students between the two institutions
- agree to initiate the process of developing Memorandum of Understanding (MoU) to strengthen the ongoing collaboration.

Partnership for strengthening one-another

The following section offers some challenges and practical advice for other higher education institutions that are considering the setting up of a new partnership. Our advice is based on our own experiences and is listed below in no particular order.

- Although official partnerships are between institutions, it is the collaboration between people, individuals who work together, that make them viable.
- Partnerships need an investment; this is not just in terms of money, but also, for example to travel to the partner institution as well as emotional investment in the relationship. The travel cost may extend to “two-way visits and inspections, material and sample transport between sites, and adherence to ethical and/or clinical guidelines, relative costs, especially for labour are often lower” [6]. We would argue that setting up a partnership particularly needs investment in time. Getting to know your partner, knowing how their institution works, knowing what each of the two institutions wants to get out of the partnership, etc.

- In addition to the point about time, partnership does not start at the moment the piece of paper is signed, it starts long before that with collaborations between individuals from the proposed partnership institutions.
- Expectations are bound to differ between higher education institutions and between staff working in the respective institutions. Not only are there socio-cultural differences between Nepal and the UK, also individual higher education institutions each have their own quirky culture and ways of working. It takes time to get know your partner and their way of thinking, decision-making and working.
- Not all collaborations need formal signed partnership. Especially in the field of research where research projects are often simple sub-contracts between institutions without any wider institutional collaboration.
- Although some may consider partnerships between low and high-income countries to be merely development projects which offer capacity building in the least developed countries, we are convinced that there are also major benefits to universities in high-income countries.

Final thoughts

It would be easy to start with the key message that is the desire at the side of the Nepali partner to bring technology and innovations in education and research that has occurred in the UK to Nepal. We acknowledge that there is a strong desire to learn and improve education and research in higher education in Nepal. However, there are also strong push factors at the side of the UK partners. One key motivating factor is the need to bring the wider world into the UK curriculum to ensure that UK graduates fit a global labour market. This involves exposing UK students to different cultures through ways of living, working and learning.

Last, but not least, we would argue that a good global partnership between higher education institutions requires a lot of thought, an understating of each other's needs, dedicated contact persons, and a willingness to work in a slightly different way to make things work. As our case studies indicate the reach and longevity of international partnerships is often based on individuals. It is the personal investment of academics collaborating across borders and making long-term commitments.

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