

Understanding the Barriers to Collaborative Research: Experiences of Some Academics at the Zimbabwe Open University

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ABSTRACT

Collaborative research is increasingly becoming popular with academics across the globe. There are many advantages that arise from research partnerships such as shared experiences in the form of research methodology, the pulling together of financial resources, research skills and technology among others. However, there are also many barriers to collaborative research. This research paper is based on the barriers to collaborative research as experienced by academics at the Zimbabwe Open University. The study employed a qualitative research approach. A purposive sample of 20 academics from the Zimbabwe Open University was used. Semi structured interview technique was used to gather data on the barriers to collaborative research. Interpretive content analysis was used for data analysis. Some of the barriers that were surfaced by the study include those to do with culture and language, different levels of experience in research, finance, research skills, and the inability to check research findings in different countries among others that will be discussed by the paper.

Keywords: Barriers, Collaborative research, Academics, University.

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1. INTRODUCTION

The paper will unfold as follows, a brief literature review with respect to the nature of collaborative research will be given, followed by the methodology section which spells out how the research was carried out. The results section follows, leading into the conclusions section. Finally, recommendations will be given in the form of how barriers to collaborative research can be minimized.

2. LITERATURE REVIEW

Scholars have defined collaborative research in a number of ways. In the views of Morrison *et al.* (2003) collaborative research takes two forms, namely horizontal and vertical collaboration. According to them, horizontal collaboration takes place among peers, while vertical collaboration is about junior academics working with more senior academics. 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) define collaboration as “the coming together of diverse interests and people to achieve a common purpose via interactions, information sharing, and coordination of activities”. It is evident from the above definitions that collaborative research can be viewed as a special form of collaboration, done for the purpose of knowledge production through the process of enquiry. A number of barriers/ risks to collaborative research have come to surface. In the views of Wray (2006) collaborative research is associated with a number of risks, for example, there is a risk of assigning points to the collaborators, especially for scientific publications. The assigning of points to researchers often leads to tensions and demotivation of the researchers who are assigned less points (Bukvova, 2010). Such a scenario, often acts as a barrier to participation by some researchers. Another barrier can be in the form of the assignment of responsibilities for the various research tasks. There must be clarity right from the beginning on who among the researchers does what task so that there are no problems later. Also the question on the ownership of the results has acted as a barrier for research collaboration (Bukvova, 2010). Other barriers surfaced by scholars include issues of accountability which may result in lower quality of research output (Wray, 2006) and high costs of collaboration (Cummings and Kiesler, 2007). Furthermore, due to increased control of research and research funding by the providers of capital (Altbach, 2005) there is a risk of loss of intellectual property in the form of research data and findings to the providers of funds. In developing countries for example in Africa, unavailability of research funds is one of the adverse factors experienced by academics in higher education institutions (Currie *et al.*, 2002; Subotzky, 2003; Wolf-Wendel and Ward, 2006).

Collaborative research has developed into a key facet of the research landscape, and is considered appropriate for the development of further knowledge. In that regard, 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 and the minimization of barriers. In the views of Stead and Harrington (2000) in Goddard *et al.* (2010) collaborative research should be guided by the following: 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

A qualitative research approach was used to gather the data. This approach was considered appropriate since it made it possible for the researcher to probe and interrogate issues pertaining to the phenomenon under

investigation. Using this approach, it was possible to generate data from the participants' view points. The sample was purposively selected and was composed of eight academics from ZOU's Mashonaland West Region, six from Mashonaland Central Region, three from the Mashonaland East Region, and three from Manicaland Region, totalling 20 respondents.

Data from respondents was generated through semi-structured interview technique. The interviews lasted for forty – five minutes to an hour long. The proceedings were recorded verbatim on digital voice recorder in the privacy of the participants' offices. Thereafter, the data was analysed using thematic content analysis.

4. RESULTS

4.1. Profile of Respondents

There were 20 respondents, composed of 12 males and 8 females. 12 of the respondents had more than five years of university teaching, while 8 members' university teaching experience ranged from three to five years. Six of the respondents held PhD's, one of the respondents was pursuing doctoral studies, while the rest were holders of Masters Degrees in their respective teaching areas. Seven of the respondents had some experience in collaborative research (see Tables 1, 2, 3 and 4 below).

Table-1. Distribution of Respondents by gender

Gender	Frequency	Percentage (%)
Male	12	60
Female	8	40
Total	20	100

Source:: Research Data

Table 1 above shows that more males than females responded to the study. This is a reflection of the current situation in Zimbabwean Higher Education institutions in which there is a majority of male lecturers compared to females.

Table-2. Distribution of Respondents by Qualifications

Qualification	Frequency	Percentage (%)
PhD	6	30
Masters	14	70
Total	20	100

Source:: Research Data

The majority of respondents were holders of Masters degrees as shown by table 2 above. As mentioned earlier, one of the respondents with a Masters degree was studying for PhD.

Table-3. Distribution of Respondents by Work experience

Experience (Years)	Frequency	Percentage (%)
3 - 5	8	40
> 5	12	60
Total	20	100

Source:: Research Data

As shown by table 3 above, the majority of respondents had more than five years working experience.

Table-4. Distribution of Respondents by Experience in Research Collaboration

Experience	Frequency	Percentage (%)
Yes	7	35
No	13	65
Total	20	100

Source:: Research Data

Table 4 above, shows that seven of the respondents had research collaboration experience.

4.2. Comment on the Sample

As shown by the tables 1 – 4 above the sampled individuals' had sufficient university teaching experience, educational qualifications and research experiences to be best suited to discuss competently and respond to questions on the phenomenon under investigation.

4.3. Findings of the Study

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

Unavailability of or poor ICT infrastructure in some developing countries pauses a disadvantage of poor communication between research partners for example through video conferencing, skype or internet connectivity. Collaborating partners would normally want to meet face to face at the initiation stage of their partnership in order to iron out certain important issues of the agreement. Through the use of ICT, collaborating partners can engage in activities such as video conferencing and skyping as a substitute for the initial face to face interaction which is vital at the conceptualisation stage of the research project. According to [Goddard et al. \(2010\)](#) in the absence of initial face to face interaction collaborators

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...

Another barrier that was surfaced by the study was a situation in which *the partners may not be in pursuit of the same goal*. For example, informants mentioned that sometimes an overseas partner comes with funds for research but insists on the pursuit of his/ her agenda for research. In that regard, that insistence becomes a barrier for collaboration if the partners do not come out with a workable arrangement for both their interests. 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. In the views of [Anderson \(2011\)](#)

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.

Informants also raised the barrier of *political challenges which arise as a result of government control of research agendas in certain countries*. According to most informants, in some countries, certain research topics may clash with some government interests. This may lead to failure by researchers to access the research data due to lack of access

to the field of research. The permission to research may never be given as the responsible authorities will be reluctant to issue permits for research. Partners originating from countries where such red tape is not the norm may be discouraged to continue collaborating under such circumstances.

Barrier due to marginalisation for the less developed country researcher: One other finding of the study is that developing country collaborative research partners often do not have funding of their own due to poverty and lack of local support for research. They are unable to meet the other partner halfway in terms of funding. As such, informants were of the view that the partner who is bringing in the funds, often wants to play a leading role in the partnership. They often want to influence the direction of the research and at the end own and control the results. In that regard the local research partner is at risk of being reduced to a mere research assistant. According to an informant,

“The partner who owns the money often comes in with his own research agenda and also wants to dictate how the money should be spent and how the research should be conducted. If you have your own pride, you pull out of it altogether.”

Such a scenario as above often has negative repercussions for the local poor country researcher as they are often left with empty hands as the overseas, often highly experienced research partner who has high status and is able to command research funds from funders takes charge of all the research process in terms of ownership of the data as well as publication rights and the research report.

Furthermore, informants pointed out that, 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.

Additionally, respondents mentioned that there are sometimes organizational funding differences, for example some poor local country Institutions 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.

As said earlier, 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, in the views of Morrison *et al.* (2003) “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.”

One of the barriers to collaborative research mentioned by informants was that involving *the issuance of visas and work permits by local country governments' regulatory authorities:* According to their experience, 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. I write elsewhere that, “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.” These type of delays act as a barrier for chances of future collaborative research efforts.

Another finding that emerged from the study had to do with *the diversity in terms of disciplines within the research teams*: Informants were of the view that some of the challenges they had encountered had to do with how partners from different disciplines approached the research effort. Generally these challenges had to do with

approaches to work habits, writing style, methodological issues, technical jargon and authorship among others. In the cases in which 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.

One other threat to collaborative research mentioned by respondents is *the issue of Authorship*: As said earlier, 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. Moreover, the criteria for authorship among collaborators has 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 (see Bukvova (2010)).

Authenticity of data: In the experiences of some of the informants, in some cases it is difficult to verify the data gathered in another country by a research partner. One has to trust their collaborative partner for reliability of the data. Participants noted that at times they found it 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 (see Anderson (2011)).

According to some respondents, another barrier for collaborative research is *the exploitative nature in which research students and postdoctoral fellows are used by senior researchers in institutions who are in collaborative research relationships with international partners*. In their view, students and postdoctoral fellows in research collaborations do not have a say pertaining to issues of the research process in which they take part or have done a lot of work. Established scholars have tended to lead the partnerships and controlled the data, thereby reducing the students and fellows to mere assistants. Such attitudes, may lead to fewer or no students taking part in collaborative research work.

Furthermore, informants raised the barrier of *language and cultural differences*: In their view, there are risks of wrong translations or misrepresentation due to 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).

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.

One other barrier to collaborative research mentioned by informants was associated with research skills. *They mentioned that it was important not to assume that research partners have certain 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.

5. CONCLUSIONS

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

1. Most of the barriers revolve around the question of funding whereby the incoming collaborating partner harnesses the funds and other pre-requisite resources and ends up influencing the direction of the research project. As such risks marginalising the local researcher pertaining to the direction of the research project.
2. There is limited corporate funding of academic research on the local developing country level. The few available tend to set the research agenda. As a result the local researcher carries the risk of losing control over their research effort to the provider of funds.
3. There is the risk of non participation in collaborative research by developing country researchers since in most cases it is difficult to control the direction of collaborative research.
4. Poorly developed ICT infrastructure in some developing countries does not enable effective collaboration among researchers as it makes it difficult for face-to-face discussions at the early stages of the collaborative research thereby give rise to the risks of misunderstandings about how the research effort is to be executed.

5.1. Minimising the Barriers to Collaborative Research

In order to minimise the barriers, it is recommended that:

1. Institutions in developing countries are encouraged to set some funds aside for their researchers' collaborative efforts.
2. Developing country academics should take advantage of international research conferences hosted in their own countries to foster and nurture collaborative research teams.
3. Institutions in developing countries are encouraged to build enabling environments for collaborative research through the establishment of ICT communications infrastructure in the form of internet connections among others.
4. I 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 and other pertinent issues to do with the collaboration effort at the very beginning of the research partnership.

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