

ACU Spotlight

Building university partnerships for sustainable development

Policy and Research Unit

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Interuniversity partnerships in lower- and middle-income countries are increasingly recognised for their potential to address development challenges. This has opened a space for the ACU to play a facilitating and supporting role in helping to broker strong, effective partnerships that address development challenges and to identify good practice in partnerships.

In turning towards such work, key questions arise: what is needed for developing country HEIs to better access project funding? How might the sustainability of projects be best improved? And how can joint ownership of projects with Southern partners be strengthened?

Key points

- Partnership teams need to be governed by principles of transparency, shared ownership and commitment, but also require enduring institutional support and the right institutional infrastructure.
- South-South university partnerships can be an important impetus to greater institutional capacity building, but such capacity building is a long-term process that requires sustained support.
- Partnership mentoring has a positive impact on the rate of successful funding proposals. The ACU mentored nascent South-South partnerships in their applications to the DelPHE programme. In the first year, only 7% of applications without UK partners were successful in their application; by the fifth year, this had grown to 27%.
- International offices within universities can play a role in supporting staff and providing advice to academics engaging in new partnerships.
- Training and skills development is an important element of capacity building for partnership sustainability, and some partnerships have built these elements into the terms of their collaboration.

The contribution of higher education to development is now widely accepted. As global donor bodies seek more effective measures to address development challenges, there is now an established recognition that universities serve as important engines of highly-skilled professionals across a range of disciplines, including health sciences, engineering, and education.

Facing large-scale development challenges, however, is beyond the capacity of any single university. This is what makes interuniversity partnerships – and especially South-South interuniversity partnerships – an important force multiplier. They allow individual institutions to

combine their particular strengths into a cohesive and more complete development strategy.

Managing South-South partnerships

Managing South-South partnerships is no easy task – the internal structures for international project management are sometimes lacking, and the in-house expertise in application design may not be in place. Northern partners often bring valuable project design experience and, if based in the country of the donor, are often more familiar with the ‘language’ of project application.

Yet South-South partnerships can yield unique gains in institutional capacity building. They are less likely to suffer from resource asymmetries, and they can ensure a much greater project ownership by the Southern institutions.

The challenge for sponsors, then, is how best to provide the support that South-South teams require to be most effective and genuinely collaborative?

The DeIPHE experience

One example is the Development Partnerships in Higher Education (DeIPHE) programme. Funded by the UK Department for International Development (DFID), DeIPHE was designed to enable interuniversity partnerships that address Millennium Development Goals in the country of the lead partner. Chiefly administered by the British Council, the ACU played a supportive role in helping to broker and mentor South-South applicants to the scheme.

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DeIPHE funded 200 interuniversity partnerships between 2006 and 2010 (22 of them South-South), with each partnership funded for three years. With DeIPHE's last allocation of funding now committed, the programme will be evaluated to assess what has worked well and what lessons have been learned to help inform future schemes.

Over five years, the ACU convened potential Southern partners to build applications to the DeIPHE scheme. This was done through requesting project proposal outlines from across our broad membership in Africa and Asia, which we then used to help source potential partners with similar disciplinary expertise and interests.

Matchmaking and marital advice

This kind of 'online matchmaking' has its challenges – partners with similar and complimentary expertise are essential but if they have only been convened by email, the relationships are difficult to build. Which partners will take which responsibilities in drafting the application? What are the communication strengths and differences between partners? How can a team generate strong, effective strategies without brainstorming around a table together?

Human relationships cannot be artificially manufactured, but they can be strengthened through identifying common purpose. Our work focused on encouraging discussion between new partners, reviewing and providing feedback on draft applications, and trying to draw out a project strategy around which all partners could rally and contribute.

Our most recent evaluation of the scheme has centred on enabling access, and facilitating the team building process. What more can we do to get strong South-South teams off the ground?

Surveying applicants

We were confident that South-South access was improving over the five-year lifespan of DeIPHE. Just 7% of projects approved in Round 1 involved all non-UK partners, but this ratio grew steadily and in Round 5, 27% of approved projects had all non-UK partners. But what of the non-approved projects?

A survey was launched in late 2010, asking all South-South applicants – both successful and unsuccessful – about their experience of applying for DeIPHE funding, of project design, and of partnership building.

Of 90 responses, 44 were from unsuccessful applicant teams. Among them, respondents indicated that the brokering and mentoring services they received had had a positive effect. 43% of the successful South-South applicants were in receipt of South-South applicant support services, whereas only 20% of the unsuccessful teams engaged with us.

We also noted that success rates were highest amongst very old partnership teams who had worked together on a range of projects over the years, as well as amongst the very newest partnerships, which had been convened through the brokering services. Medium-aged partnership teams were relatively less successful. This suggested that the oldest teams, which are proven and durable, can be successful through established mutual understanding – and that the newest teams can likewise be successful if that mutual understanding is accelerated by external facilitation.

Challenges to access

We asked applicants to identify some of the key challenges in project design and partnership building overall (see Chart 1). Their responses indicated that:

- securing institutional permissions was not generally a problem – 75% of respondents told us that this was 'very easy' or 'quite easy'

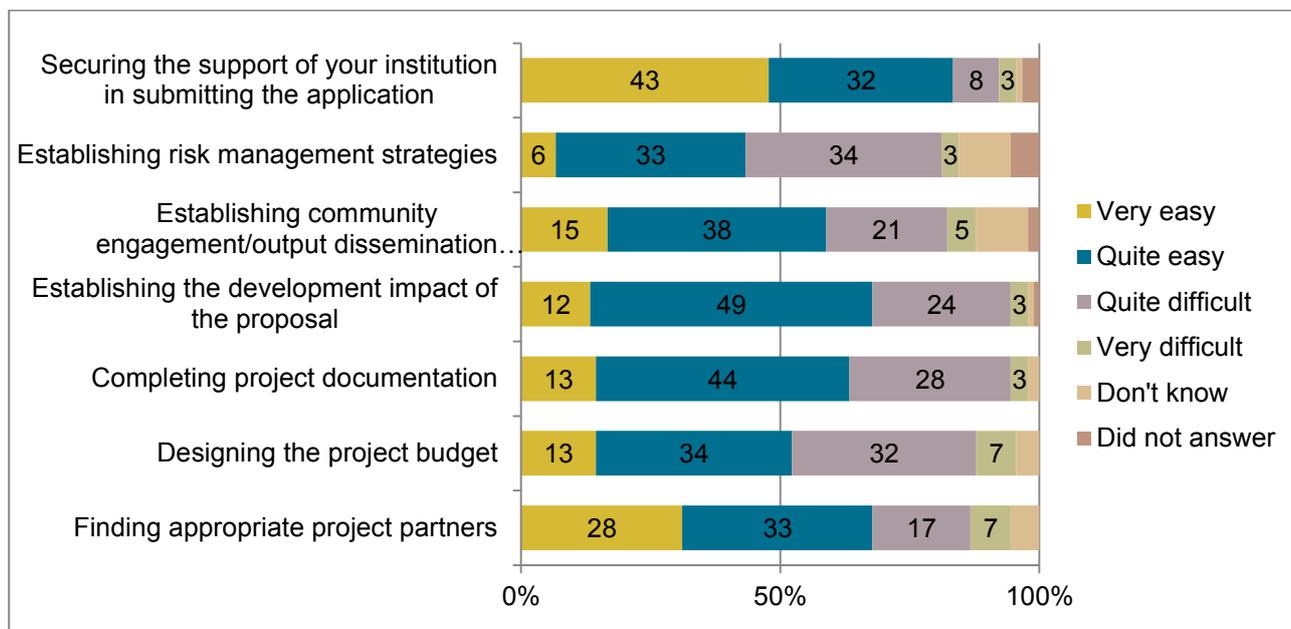


Chart 1: DelPHE South-South survey responses – ‘Please select how difficult or how easy you found the following aspects of applying to DelPHE’

- establishing risk management strategies, though, was among the most difficult aspects of project design – a majority of respondents found it ‘quite difficult’, ‘very difficult’, or did not know

Often, partnership teams struggled with explicitly identifying project risks, not because these are not apparent, but perhaps because such explicit ‘admission’ of risk is seen to constitute an admission of project weakness.

Designing project budgets was also seen as a significant challenge. While external supporters such as the ACU can assist with aspects of this, the long-term challenge is for the universities themselves to develop the internal structures that manage project funding, as well as to advise. Research management capacity is key to providing project applicants with the supporting tools and the procedural framework within which they can succeed.

Thus, besides supporting individual partnerships and applications, international bodies need to support the institutional infrastructures that can lead to more effective applications.

Good practice in international partnerships

In addition to providing this brokering service to DelPHE partners, the ACU also undertook an analysis of UK-Africa partnerships. The *Good Practices in Educational Partnerships Guide* was published by the ACU’s Africa Unit in 2010, with

the support of the UK Department for Business, Innovation and Skills (BIS).¹

The Guide puts forward a conceptual framework of the main drivers of international partnerships and the major challenges to their success, and identifies 10 key partnership principles of management and governance.

The Guide draws upon the specific experience of UK-Africa higher and further educational partnerships, but it is also intended to inform different types of partnerships across all regions. The principles identified can be utilised by North-South and South-South partnerships alike, with an emphasis on good governance, institutional infrastructure, and effective communication as key to success.

The 10 principles of management and good governance are as following:

1. Shared ownership
2. Trust and transparency
3. Mutual understanding of different cultural and working environments
4. Clear division of roles and responsibilities
5. Effective and regular communication
6. Joint strategic planning and implementation
7. Strong commitment across the board from staff and management
8. Supportive institutional infrastructure

¹ Wann, Nada, Sarah Hinz and Rebecca Day, *Good Practices in Educational Partnerships Guide: UK-Africa Higher and Further Education Partnerships* (London: Africa Unit/ACU, 2010)

9. Monitoring and evaluation

10. Sustainability

Drawing on the experiences of a number of case studies and a survey conducted by the Africa Unit, these principles were commonly identified as the core elements of strong and effective partnerships.

Given historically unequal power relations, it is crucial that partners in a North-South partnership, particularly the Northern partners, ensure that they are not the only ones setting the agenda. Southern partners must be involved in the decision-making process and ownership of the partnership. Successful partnerships are based on genuine exchange and cooperation.

Key approaches to ensuring this include:

- Be clear and transparent about partnerships' aims and expectations.
- Ensure there is detailed discussion about the different aspects and stages of the partnership before any decision is taken.
- Make every effort to reach mutual understanding about the different partnership aspects, whenever possible.
- Make sure that partners jointly participate in the decision-making process and management of the partnership.
- Ensure no decisions concerning the other partner are taken without prior discussion.

These approaches are essential for any partnership team, but the importance of having the appropriate infrastructure and institutional support is paramount. These infrastructural needs should be discussed between partners with transparency, in order for them to be adequately identified and addressed.

It is particularly interesting to note that some African HEIs, such as the University of Stellenbosch (South Africa) and the University of Gondar (Ethiopia), have established international offices and developed international engagement strategies as a mechanism for coordinating external activities and links, including international partnerships. Such mechanisms provide support and advice for staff and departments that want to engage in partnerships, as well as helping to supply information and data on where partnerships exist, thus widening and deepening the evidence base.

With regard to the principle of *sustainability*, external funding is available to support the establishment and initial stages of a partnership. Partnerships that intend to go beyond this, though, need to be clear about how funding to sustain the project will be sourced. As we make clear in other parts of the Guide, personal commitment and developing a good relationship are necessary but,

in the absence of a clear financing plan, often not sufficient.

While there is no 'one size fits all' solution, it is possible to identify principles which have contributed to successful and sustainable international partnerships and which can inform future partnerships.

Conclusions

Universities in lower- and middle-income countries have a key role to play in addressing development challenges in their home countries and regions, and partnership is an essential way for them to do this effectively.

Both the DelPHE partnership brokering and mentoring and the UK-Africa Partnerships Guide have been important facilities to encourage strong interuniversity partnerships with Southern ownership. They have also provided useful opportunities for the ACU to deliver value to members, through playing a supportive role in brokering and mentoring partnerships.

Enabling new partnership teams amongst lower- and middle-income countries to instigate, develop, and manage successful projects is necessarily a long-term process. With that in mind, it is encouraging that we are witnessing a growing pool of experience and expertise in partnership building and a renewed emphasis on developing the requisite institutional infrastructure, and are drawing important lessons that can be applied for partnerships of the future.

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To download the *Good Practices in Educational Partnerships Guide*, visit:
www.acu.ac.uk/publication/download?id=301

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