PREPARING FOR PARTICIPATION IN INTERNATIONAL RESEARCH: LESSONS FOR AFRICA

ABSTRACT

This paper explores the challenges that researchers new to being part of, or, managing a collaborative research team should consider when conducting business management research as part of a cooperative international research study composed of several research teams working in cohesion but isolated by geography. This provides a review of best practice to consider when undertaking a research project that is commenced simultaneously across borders by different researchers. This paper conceptually suggests aspects of planning collective research design that may be critically important to consider in gaining ethical, reliable and valid findings. As the world is interconnected, research that leads to producing comparative studies of findings drawn from two or more countries simultaneously, becomes valuable yet the risk management of this is infrequently dealt with in a consolidated chapter or section in research methodology textbooks.

Key words: collaboration, business research, risk, Africa

INTRODUCTION

A great deal of empirical literature exists on arguments as why to bother with risk management and how to apply a risk management strategy. An overview of the typical steps in research design is comprehensively described in academic business research methodology text books so generally well understood for a specific single research country context but, when the research takes place in several countries simultaneously, this brings unique risks not often considered in terms of a collaborative international research project.

PROBLEM INVESTIGATED

Industry disciplines have academically recorded project risk types to be commonly recognised for specific business industries recommending possible contingency plans to manage them. However, little of this research currently addresses the risks in running an international academic business research project. It cannot be an assumption that all university researchers understand project management and its associated diagnosis of risk in the business context of research. International research co-operation is highly mooted in academia as being of value to all parties in that new knowledge from the project is richer than that gathered in a single country ultimately building collaborative research partnerships for publishing (Perkmann and Walsh, 2007). Yet, academic business research methodology textbooks tend not to give a merged idea of what should be considered in participating with global research teams in a single consolidated manner during research and resultant knowledge creation.

This paper is a review of available academic literature on this body on collaborative research. The paper attempts to outline some valuable resources that highlight considerations for collaborative business research design also attempting to capture some of the African research contexts that should be contemplated.

PROBLEM STATEMENT

Pouris and Ho (2014) draw attention to an increasing focus in Africa on collaboratively created research articles between Africa and others outside of the continent. Internationally, collaborative articles published in this manner grew from 52 to 58% on the African continent between 2007 and 2011. Yet, research academic business research methodology text books typically used to educate South African business management research methodology students on how to derive a valid and reliable research design strategy, fail to draw attention to how best to work together as Africans with

international teams to develop research strategy that importantly manages the risk elements but also holds attractive research outcomes for all stakeholders.

RESEARCH OBJECTIVE

Project management is a discipline that lends a well-tested framework can be adopted for international research design. The influence of elements of project management as regards collusion with research partners external to one's own country in co-creating an overall research design strategy, is limited. This paper broadly identifying elements to be considered in developing the research design for collaborative research.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Many countries in Africa are considered as emerging markets and Roberts, Kayande and SrivastavaIt (2015) suggest developed countries may have a particular interest in collaborative research in Africa looking on the emerging markets as a possible major source of reverse innovation flows and, for testing new theories of business. George, Khayesi and Haas (2016) point out Africa is relatively unexplored in terms of management research and there is a need to address this because of its fast growing economies. This makes research contexts set in Africa very attractive to partner with by external researchers as so little is known about it unique business contexts and its innovations (Rosenkopf and Almeida, 2003). Pouris and Ho (2014) note that collaborative research is increasing each year between internationally situated teams (situated outside of Africa) and African research counterparts pointing out that this may be largely spurred on by availability of research funding coming from the external partner. Thus, the external partner may hold the key to the terms of a collaborative research agreement because of funding. Funding source plays a critical part in who gets what in the collaborative team (Godin and Gingras, 2000). That said, African researchers then need to be aware of the risks that can occur in a collaborative research partnership to be able to address these issues when the project scope documents are being composed and throughout the project timeline to ensure the outcomes serve their own continent (Burke, 2010).

International research studies funded by institutions sometimes do indeed ask for a project risk analysis before the joint research begins but even if not specifically asked for, one should always be undertaken. Renn and Graham (2006) highlight the risks that should be considered as project decisions are made between researchers of different experience, roles, ages, and genders, each with differing perspectives of how to achieve desired outcomes. These authors emphasise the importance

of understanding the need for inclusion of a broader societal-specific context to assessing risk together with understanding that the stakeholders will assess risk differently because of their personal worldview. Additionally, these same stakeholders will also be balancing their personal views of risk with that dictated by their institutional policies (or lack thereof) as part of the scientific community. They will also be influenced in their decisions by broader regulatory considerations such as socio-political impacts from governmental elements and business. Allen (2008) draws attention to the influence a prescriptive ethics framework can have inhibiting a proposed research because the research design is one not encountered before in the regulatory framework. This type of national viewpoint is a risk in itself for the collaborative team to consider. These elements make it hard to identify cause and effect relationships in designing research. This paper attempts to highlight some of the unique risks identified in academic literature faced by international collaborating research teams in business research contexts particularly African field research contexts

RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

Five academic textbooks (Bryman and Bell, 2016; Fox and Bayat, 2013; Creswell, 2014; Saunders, Lewis and Thornhill, 2016; Babbie et al, 2015) used to teach or reference research methodology at a South African public university for business management at post graduate level, were reviewed. The researcher looked in their indexes for key words and phrases such as: research collaboration, international research, research team(s), and, research risk (not including risk in terms of statistical significance). The purpose of this search was to identify eloquent and usefully detailed sections or chapters in these books that would help direct and manage business management collaborative research projects across borders, while minimizing research project risk. To explore collaborative research risk mitigation in academic business research strategy collaboration undertaken to-date, the researcher undertook a systematic review using Google Scholar™. The search was made on the key words: collaborative, research, risk, business – but these keywords produced predominantly articles not related to designing a collaborative modus operando for a cooperating research team to adopt. Finally, only 20 articles of nearly 200 returned and reviewed by the Google search™ were considered valuable in understanding the risks for collaborative research. These were summarised to provide information to consider relevant to multi-national partner project management and, individual, multi-national, team member participation in research for social sciences.

FINDINGS

It is important to establish a definition for risk on which this discussion is based. The term risk management is defined by Burke (2010, 374) as, "a risk is any event which might prevent the project achieving its objectives. The following findings in existing literature highlighted in the papers reviewed are considered relevant to contemplate in designing collaborative research strategy:

- Risk management is, therefore, the process of identifying risk, quantifying risk, and controlling the risk management". The role of managing risk is well established in project management. Project Management Institute Project Management Body of Knowledge™ (PMI PMBOK, 2018), PRINCE2™, (2018), International Project Management Association™ (IPMA, 2018), International Electrotechnical Commission™ (IEC 62198) (IEC, 2018) and, International Organization for Standardization™ (IS0) 31000:2009, each provide excellent recommendations for best practice for globally accepted standards for risk management (Purdy, 2010; Rehacek, 2017). The value of project management techniques is that any type of project including designing a research strategy, can follow one or more of these practical guidelines of their choice adapting them to their own purposes but retaining the key elements common to all in risk analysis. Several standardising systems exist to help with applying an internationally understood single 'risk' language when devising the risk mitigation strategy. The ISO guide 73:2009 provides definitions that all collaborating parties can apply (ISO, 2018);

- Risk management is strategic planning and all standardising systems suggest steps to follow: firstly to diagnose and manage risks. Planned risk management can guide how the research teams will collude to conduct risk management activities for the project contextualizing the project for every team members by considering their own legislations and influences from their geographic region, thereby identifying overlapping areas and areas where there is more importantly, no overlap and how to manage this latter condition; Identify risks that may affect the project has several phases: perform qualitative risk analysis as a team using brainstorming sessions to source a list of possible risks, then prioritise each risk identified with a ranking by combining the severity of the risk if it happens multiplied by the numeric probability of that risk occurring (as decided by team members); then provide a final quantitative risk analysis value (risk score) for every risk in view of where in the project timeline they may occur and why; plan risk responses to each risk based on this analysis that either eliminate or reduce the risk;

- Control of the risks throughout the entire project duration is necessary by constantly evaluating whether an anticipated risk is becoming likely to occur and importantly as the project progresses, identifying new risks (ISO, 2018). Luppino, Reza Hosseini and Rameezdeenhe (2014) suggest that while this process is internationally widely accepted it is inadequate as it adopts only two-dimensions in analysing the likelihood that a risk will occur, then the severity of the effect on the project if it occurs (the two multiplied give the risk score per risk as described). These authors indicate in unique research contexts as is often the case with a research collaboration, key designing stakeholders should be encouraged to assess a third factor in addition to the risk analysis scoring - the ability to foresee a risk;

- In academic research the experience of each researcher in the collaborating team would vary so an exercise in identifying who has most past experience with each risk in a research project and weighting the 'severity x probability' scores with this third factor, can help in final decision-making on courses of action to be adopted. This exercise, they note will highlight the ability of a key stakeholder to assess risk which in turn may affect risk scores;

- Baccarini and Melville (2011, 225-226) present a very useful consolidation for the management of academic social sciences research projects drawn from the risk identifications of ten authors highlighting several broad risk categories for consideration when establishing a project as follows: the commercial and financial implications as regards intellectual property loss, funder disputes, inefficient funding dispersal mechanisms; conflict regarding use of research results; research outcomes achievability and integrity where there is little chance of meeting the stated objectives; misconduct in carrying out the research; falsification of primary data; plagiarised material; unjustified claims not supported by empirical evidence; research methods and process designed as regards application of health and safety standards, research undertaken without all parties approval of the design, research methods adopted to collect data without approval from all parties, method of data collection not clearly described, collected data not stored securely, and, lost data;

- The research team composition plays an important part in defining the project risk in that: there could be a lack of quality in individual researchers' ability; or, there may be a risk that sufficient researchers cannot be recruited to successfully implement the project; and, the recruited researchers may be inadequately trained on project standardisation techniques for methodology application; the project management could finally set unrealistic expectations of what each researcher is expected to do;

- There are also risks associated with the value created by the research for external stakeholders: target stakeholders are not clearly informed of what is happening; funder's needs are not satisfied by the project outcomes; the media produces adverse commentary on the project; the funder loses intangible brand value due to the project being poorly carried out; and, the funder loses confidence in the project team because of poor financial management;

- Then there is the consideration of research ethics-where: physical or psychological harm occurs for the participants; there are breaches of respect of cultural traditions; conflicts of interest go undeclared; misconduct goes unreported; researchers fail to gain consent from stakeholders for their research; and, a particular sample is disadvantaged by the research in some manner. Finally it is important to consider the damage to project infrastructure-from an emergency situation e.g. fire/flood, and, having in place suitable tangible facilities to support the research process;

- Binder(2016) draws attention to the following risks in a global project: managing time zones which can cause delays of information transfer of one to two days which in turn lends to different parties of a project losing their synchronicity in collaborating; different languages leading to confusion as to how words are used and what they mean particularly during online meetings; country cultures which are widely recommended to improve diversity of ideas but can also lead to conflict of who's way of doing things is best; the number of different organisations or principal stakeholders involved can bring complexity as the number increases; finally, the challenge of gaining all participants views at every project step defined.

- Schachtebeck, Groenewald and Nieuwenhuizen (2018) note that the purpose of pilot studies has not been considered enough in much of South African business research design. Often this design step can act as a feasibility test as to the appropriateness to conduct the design in a larger scope. In African business studies these authors have found in many business research articles, the purpose of the pilot is not clearly described and the influence of the findings of the pilot on the final design, not reported on. The authors indicate that this can create considerable risk as readers may not accept the final results presented as valid and reliable if the pilot results are not sufficiently described to warrant reader confidence in the survey design;

- Technology risks arise in that the software or hardware technologies that are used needing to be the same to ensure when results are consolidated the findings if from different sources, are

valid. An infamous example of a collaborative research project dealing differently in different geographic contexts with the same problem was for instance the incorrect sizing of the Hubble telescope mirror (Hefcht, 1990);

- Owusu, Kalipeni, Awortwi, and Kiiru (2016) indicate that African researchers may also want to draw attention to their own cultural influences in terms of using the 'human touch' which pays particular attention during African business management research contexts to the effect of Ubuntu (humaness). Ignoring the influence of Ubuntu can be a risk and may not be an element that the overseas collaborative partner is aware of, but does indeed need consideration in designing the research interrogative instruments (Molose, Goldman and Thomas, 2018);

- Mkaabela (2005) focuses attention to the Afrocentric research methods in that the African researcher needs to draw on African social and cultural immersion to research African phenomena. Sooryamoorthy (2013) notes that non-Africans often provide the tangibles of the project such as finance and equipment but it is the African partners who provide access to local communities. This means an African researcher would bring to the international research collaboration, insights to African history, language, culture and philosophy that may well affect how the people interrogated by the African part of the study may differ in responses from those external to the continent and how such insights would be valuable in interpreting field data. Owusu-Ansah and Mji (2013) emphasise the concept of distinctive African indigenous knowledge systems that need consideration in research design and implementation of African undertaken research. The acquisition of knowledge in Africa is often collective and community oriented. It is predominantly not written but orally passed from person to person through activities such as song, poetry, dance and other oral methods. As such even respondents who have no experience with writing or using written words may have very valuable information to add in researching phenomena. "Understanding the personal components in collaboration is not always easy" (Sooryamoorthy, 2013, 1).

These issues as noted can become very important in designing for a collaborative research strategy.

MANAGERIAL IMPLICATIONS

Once the research is complete the African researchers owe it to the continent to make sure this research is available for reference within Africa. Van Wyk and Du Toit (2016) note that this is best

managed by ensuring the research is made available in African open access repositories but this does not always occur – a risk to be managed to ensure future African knowledge development. Publishing in Africa for Africans is not always attractive to the research teams who are wanting to place the project descriptions in high impact, pay-to-access journals. Ajakaiye (2007) also highlights how foreign funded research often can be used by governments and business to influence African governmental policy-making as the funder has the financial leverage to influence these policies. This is not always a favourable option for ensuring African policy benefits Africans first.

Lages, Pfajfar and Shoham (2015) note that field data may be difficult to collect in Africa as the culture of African countries often has gatekeepers this needs to be assessed as to how to make an approach by the research team to seek permission for research access (for instance tribal/ community leaders, government departments) to respondents and this access permission can take a long time. Bahn (2012) stresses the need to consider the emotional and personal safety of the field researchers in risk planning. This author indicates that university ethical regulations tend to focus more on participant health and safety than that of the researcher. Governmental regulatory guidelines on health and safety should be observed but are generally not assessed in an ethics research application to a university. Bahn (2012) emphasises the need for consideration of: pre-primary data collection security briefings to enable researchers to safely manage participants and geographic contexts, establishing call-back systems to other team members to ensure field workers do not go missing, working in pairs to help each other in the field, and, compulsory de-briefings that are recorded, transcribed and reported on as part of the project outcomes.

Piekkari and Reis (2004) draw attention to the development of a research instrument where the findings are translated to a second language, construed by an interpreter as to respondents answers, and then translated back into another language for publication. They indicate that very few research project strategies define and manage the risks involved in this concern for data transcription accuracy. Translation and interpretation would generally be the case in many countries in Africa and again cultural nuances could play in to the interpretation.

Finally, the problem of communication in business specific research cannot be overlooked. von Rosing, Fullington and Walker (2016) point out that the wide variety of business types makes communicating effectively between stakeholders, difficult. To help obviate this problem they advocate setting down a structured business ontology so that all research participants understand the

meaning of every phrase or word used in the research project scope within a particular business context.

CONCLUSION

Each of the risks highlighted have only been described briefly to draw attention to the gap in current business research text books. Additionally, the systematic review of articles undertaken to establish what exists on collaborative research management found an extremely limited number of articles. This suggests a need for further research to explore the extent to which the risks highlighted, reduce the reliability and validity of research strategies adopted, and the consequences thereof, if ignored. Training for collaborative research of African researchers needs to acknowledge that these are the very people likely to be key in the making of African university research policies, and national business policies in Africa, so it is important as tertiary educators to recommend business research methodology text books that draw attention to not only how to design a sound research strategy for a collaborative research relationship, but also to bring the essence of Africa to that research.

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