

Making it Work: Identifying the Challenges of Collaborative International Research

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ABSTRACT: In this article, we explore the challenges – and benefits – of conducting collaborative research on an international scale. The authors – from Australia, Canada, and New Zealand – draw upon their experiences in designing and conducting a three-country study. The growing pressures on scholars to work in collaborative research teams are described, and key findings and reflections are presented. It is claimed that such work is a highly complex and demanding extension to the academic's role. The authors conclude that, despite the somewhat negative sense that this reflection may convey, the synergies gained and the valuable comparative learning that took place make overcoming these challenges a worthwhile process. The experiences as outlined in this paper suggest that developing understandings of the challenges inherent in undertaking international collaborative research might well be a required component of the professional development opportunities afforded to new scholars.

In a rapidly changing and globalized world, it is self-evident that countries sharing more similarities than differences might well benefit from international collaboration on research projects addressing issues common across those countries. Indeed, such collaboration might be seen a vital part of problem-solving globally, with Stead and Harrington (2000, p. 323) noting that “(t)he world is fast becoming a global village and the problems surrounding work in one country are often issues in other countries”. Given that “research is a core activity in higher education” (Smith, 2001, p. 131), it is not surprising then, that academics working in similar areas of interest might decide to collaborate on international research spanning those interests. At a more basic level, collaboration is often pursued for the synergies arising – “the sum is greater than the individual parts” (p. 135). It is the challenges faced by academics associated with such collaboration across three countries that is the focus of this paper.

While the literature about academic collaboration across international boundaries is somewhat limited (Morrison, Dobbie & McDonald, 2003), there is some useful material that considers rationale and guidance for undertaking collaborative ventures (see for example, Lucas, 2005; Roberts, 2003; Smith, 2001). Often, however, these tend to refer to the commitment of academic staff and their accountability, relative to the required institutional research outcomes, rather than the research process itself and interactions within the partnerships. This paper offers the opportunity to recount some of the reflections about collaborative research from the perspectives of members of one collaborative research team, providing insight into the perils and pitfalls, as well as the joys and enthusiasms, of international collaborative academic research. The paper outlines the philosophy and rationale for international research collaboration and the positive outcomes that are anticipated from such interactions. Then aspects of the initiation and the implementation of the project, particularly as they offered challenges to the researchers and the research, are discussed.

The purpose of this paper is not to describe the research project itself, but rather to explore the dynamics of the research process and to identify important issues arising during the conduct of the research. It is to be noted that the aspects of collaboration discussed here are about the researchers, rather than their respective institutions, because this is where real research collaborations occur (Smith, 2001, p. 142). While we endeavour to identify and present “lessons learned” from our experience, a task which in itself tends to force the focus to remain on the challenges of the process, we are convinced that there were, and are, many positives to be gained from such international collaborations. Based on critical reflections by members of the research team, suggestions for others engaging in similar research are provided.

Undertaking collaborative research

Within a more generalised context, academics are encouraged and expected to be active researchers in their field, particularly in collaboration with international colleagues. While noting that the concept of collaboration is difficult to define, Smith (2001, p. 131) has argued that “(c)ollaboration in research activities have argued that “joint work can be

more fun than working alone" (Morrison et al., 2003, p. 277) ameliorating the fact that "research can be a lonely activity" (Smith, 2001, p. 134). Given that staff research confers a higher status and enhances possibilities of professional rewards, staff may well consider undertaking collaborative research for reasons that are less related to their teaching pedagogy and desire to further knowledge in their subjectivity is now the rule not the exception. It is encouraged by government, funding bodies and research councils". In theory, this serves to provide cross-national perspectives on domains of study, and add to the theoretical knowledge base that underpins different disciplines. There is also a "common perception that really important and valued aspects of being an academic are one's scholarly activities of researching and writing" (Meyer & Evans, 2003, p. 162) "an ideal case, the partnership produces a smooth dovetailing of skills and expertise". Stead and Harrington (2000), Morrison et al. (2003), Smith (2001) and others have identified that academics enter into research collaborations for a variety of reasons, which may range from increasing their research outputs to enhancing their possibilities for tenure or promotion, through to contributing to a field of enquiry and mentoring colleagues. Put more simply, some wr. 162).

Katz and Martin (1997) identified one of the assumptions for collaboration as a more effective way of organizing research. Such collaborations need to acknowledge that while researchers often have extensive peer networks, they tend to work "in much tighter-knit communities of practice" (Smith, 2001, p. 153). Lucas (2005, p. 482) has recently referred to the clear benefits that accrue to all collaborative parties, and suggests that witt area, than to chase the ever demanding avenues for promotion often related to increasing pressures to publish and demonstrate research productivity in some tangible form. Whatever the compulsion to undertake research, the drive to collaborate has become a 'pervasive feature' of the contemporary academic field (Solomon, Boud, Leontios, & Staron, 2001, p. 135).

In many academic contexts, the research-based funding of institutions has resulted in pressure being put on academic staff to publish and research more efficiently and effectively. Indeed, Morrison et al. (2003, p. 288) raised the possibility that the rising prominence of research collaborations might well reflect time pressures arising from competing demands of teaching, administration, and of course, research. Court examined the opinions of academics in the United Kingdom regarding how the evaluation of research affected their career progression, and suggested that the emphasis on research in deciding the career development of an academic had gone too far. In fact, he asserted that "research has assumed predominance in shaping careers through the agency of the Research Assessment Exercise (RAE) (1999, p. 86). Similar experiences are likely to be reported by academics in many other countries.

Whilst individualized credit is derived from publications of research findings (Court, 1999), every university has criteria and conditions that determine how staff are evaluated and provided with rewards (Meyer & Evans, 2003). In this context, and one that also emphasises the interactive relationship between research and teaching (Conrad, 1998), there is also interest in how collaborative research acts to stimulate the dissemination of research information across the world (Roberts, 2003).

As the sharing of ideas and good practice are vital to productive research in a tertiary context (Roberts, 2003), academics benefit from collaborative relationships through enhancing their academic skills and broadening perspectives by dialogue with different colleagues. On a more personal level, individual academics can also gain "a sense of competence and confidence by interacting with international colleagues" (Stead & Harrington, 2000, p. 330). Coffin and Leithwood (2000) suggested that participation with others is essential for "authentic activity," (p. 22) implying that such collaboration enhances partnerships and interactions between institutions, although the emphasis predominantly for academics, as noted earlier, tends to remain with the individuals, rather than the institutions (Smith, 2001, p. 142). However, institutional collaborations, evolving from individual collaborations, may facilitate dual delivery of programs, the sharing of resources and expertise, and the development of further projects.

If research collaboration is deemed both necessary by institutions (Smith [2001, p. 153] sees them as a "key facet of the research landscape"), and appropriate for the development of further knowledge, then the process of initiating collaborative research, the method by which it occurs, and the commitment of the partners is critical to successful outcomes. To this end, Stead and Harrington (2000) draw on Bedward and Anderson's (1992) notions of alliances in business ventures to identify a set of parameters to guide collaborative endeavours. Adding a fifth about relationships -- "(s)uccessful research collaborations are fundamentally based on the meaningfulness and strengths of the relationships between the researchers" (Stead & Harrington, 2000, p. 325), they provide some useful criteria against which one can reflect the experiences gained in the international collaborative research project under discussion here.

They are that:

- o relationships among partnership members are strong and meaningful;
- o the aims of the partnership have been specified and the collaborators are committed to these and are ready to cooperate;
- o the capacities of collaborators complement each other;
- o collaborators have reasonable expectations of the research process and its outcomes; and,

o the research process is well organized.

The research project and research processes described here indicate that international collaboration among practising academics is fraught with challenges, and can result in frustrations and confusion. By reflecting on our own experiences and identifying some of the challenges and hurdles we faced, we offer some suggestions to others who follow the research collaboration trail, in an effort to assist them to achieve maximum benefit from the activity.

The research project and team

The project team comprised three academic researchers, all with research and teaching interests in educational leadership, conducting a tri-national study in Australia, Canada, and New Zealand. The team represents an endeavour best described as a horizontal collaboration, rather than a vertical one. The distinction, and it is an important one, is made by Morrison et al. (2003), in that a horizontal collaboration is among peers, rather than one based around junior staff working with more senior academics. It is worth noting that the original intention was to engage two other academics, institutional colleagues of two of the team members, in the project. Due to other commitments, they did not continue with the project beyond the very early stages of discussions.

Overall, the research team worked for twelve months on a collaborative project focusing on school leadership. Recognising the changing demographics of the three countries which have led to the emergence of many multiethnic and multicultural communities, and building on previous related research by the investigators with school principals in New Zealand, Australia, Canada, Kosovo, Slovenia, Tonga, and Jersey (UK), the project sought to better understand the decision-making of principals working in secondary schools with ethnoculturally diverse communities. The research involved parallel studies across educational systems in each of the three countries. While the changing nature of the principal's role has been examined and theorized in detail both in terms of its structural characteristics and the essential nature of its leadership mode (see for example, Billot, 2003a, 2003b; Cranston, 2002; Cranston, Ehrich & Billot, 2003; Goddard, 2003, 2004; Retallick & Fink, 2002; Wildy & Loudon, 2000), little research has been undertaken with the particular focus of this project, and certainly not across three countries as done here.

Smith (2001, p. 133) has observed that it "has long been recognised that most collaborations are the result of informal conversations" – and such was the case for this project. In particular, the research team came together as a result of relationships the initiator of the project had with the other two members who had never met each other. One of these had worked with the initiator of the project on a previous research study – on-going contact between the two continued following completion of that project. The other had met the initiator at an international conference where research interests were shared, and potential future collaborative work explored.

Initial discussion among team members about the project's nature, focus, and scope was undertaken primarily by email. This process took several months due to the need to clarify core issues for conceptualizing the project, and was finally augmented by a number of teleconferences. The latter proved effective in developing an understanding of each researcher's perspectives, and how the project could be structured to encompass these perspectives. They also generated a sense of shared intellectual interest, "the key to successful interpersonal collaboration" (Smith, p. 144). However, the lack of face-to-face meetings meant that the frequency and openness of interpersonal communication, which is a core to successful collaborative research ventures, was not developed early on in the research alliance. Although useful collaborations can operate without good relationships, they tend not to last. Rather, meaningful and strong relationships are fundamental to effective research alliances, and determine the potential that is reached within the collaborative project (Stead & Harrington, 2000). In short, what was lacking across the three members of the team was a strong sense of "who each of us is". While email and teleconference discussions were collegial and productive, there was no real opportunity to get to know each as people first, and researchers second. Email remained the main communication medium among team members throughout the project, facilitating exchange of research findings, report drafts, and so on.

While it was believed there was clear and agreed commitment to the project across the three researchers, the implications and impact of other priorities in the professional lives of each member were not adequately addressed or planned for. These and other issues are taken up in the following section more detail.

Challenges facing the researchers

A number of issues and challenges arose that caused the project to falter in its early stages. Initially we had different understandings of – and positionality within – the various national literatures with respect to the concepts under investigation. The conceptual exploration of research, its focus, parameters, underlying ethos and relevant discourses, are critical aspects of debate and resolution in the design of any quality investigation. The lack of face-to-face meetings to facilitate dialogue about these matters, and to make key decisions about these, proved a critical impediment to the smooth initiation of the project across the three countries, all considerable distances from each

other. This physical distance between researchers and the subsequent high cost of travel to meet, meant that we tried to discuss highly conceptual aspects of the research under investigation by email and phone. This was only partly successful, and resulted in a somewhat fragmented approach to the study in some ways. On reflection, there is little doubt that greater clarity about important aspects of the project could have been achieved with an initial face-to-face meeting.

The different educational contexts (countries) in which each parallel project was conducted meant that different discourses and meaning were evident around some of the key concepts underpinning the research, proving problematic in gaining consistency in focus across the three countries. In addition, there were different requirements from the different educational systems and policy makers regarding critical matters surrounding the research, including access to schools, approvals for conducting research, and types of information available systemically to researchers. This resulted in different rates of progression for the project across the three study sites.

Funding proved a significant factor in many aspects of the project. Morrison et al. (2003, p. 288) have noted that 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”. The project had only minimal funding (money was available more for nation-based study rather than one of international dimensions), thus constraining the arrangement of face-to-face meetings of members of the research team as well as minimizing access to sufficient support for the research, such as that provided by quality research assistants. Despite this, some funds were made available by the project initiator to the other partners, assisting in literature reviews and interview transcription. The potential significant limiting impacts of the funding constraints were not identified and fully understood in the early stages of the project. As a result, the researchers were put under pressure to cope with timelines and proposed outputs with minimal institutional support. In this regard, we did not anticipate the potential interpersonal and research-related challenges that arose (Stead & Harriman, 2000).

Aside from the financial constraints, the different time-zones across the three countries engaged in the research determined that email became the prime medium for communication. However, despite the regularity of such contact, a sense of isolation developed among the researchers. In response to the lack of face-to-face or telephone communication, email contact became critical to retaining momentum for the project, sharing progress updates and drafts of written materials. Often, when there was not quick feedback to emails, team members were unsure of what others were doing. In fact, due to other demands on some of the researchers, the project almost became frozen with inertia, resulting in long delays in responding to member’s questions and ideas. This resulted in the project drifting in and out of our priorities. This was addressed to some extent by holding a number of teleconferences in which we shared our ideas and progress on the research. However, email remained the major medium for communication about the project and file-exchange of draft ideas/documents.

A significant and positive impetus to the research process was when the principal investigator obtained an external grant to visit the research partner located in Canada. Having had a prior research partnership with the third researcher, it was one way in which the primary investigator could build relationships with the Canadian partner, hold direct communication with him, and integrate an appreciation of the Canadian educational context more readily into project planning and process. The visit proved to be successful in several ways, and served to underline what the team had missed by not holding face-to-face meetings, at least at the start of the project. Key outcomes of the visit to Canada were scoping the research outputs for the project, developing a timeframe for their publication, drafting two journal papers, and discussing possibilities for future study. In addition, during the visit, a teleconference was held with the third researcher to provide feedback on the suggestions sent to him (by email) during the visit. The dialogue held between the two researchers during the visit stimulated a more focused approach to the project in hand, and motivated the whole research team to consider a second follow-up stage of the project.

Doing things differently

Reflection is a powerful tool to identify better ways one could have planned and implemented a research project such as that attempted in this case. A retrospectively designed project is likely to be far more appropriately facilitated than one which evolved in a dynamic set of changing circumstances as was the case here. Accepting this, and wishing to learn from our experiences and share these with others who might embark on collaborative research across several countries, we now turn to identifying some messages for the future, trying to make sense of what worked well, and what we would do differently next time.

To undertake this reflection, we draw on the criteria identified earlier (see Bedward & Anderson, 1992; Stead & Harrington, 323), summarizing our key findings and reflections in the table below. Some specific comments then follow.

CRITERIA	REFLECTIONS	SUGGESTIONS
Relationships among members – strong and meaningful	We assumed these were adequate and/or could be developed across the course of the project	These are a priority for such collaborative projects and must be attended to – face-to-face meetings at the early conceptual stages of the research are recommended as a way of facilitating their development.
Aims of the partnership are specified, and collaborators are committed to these and ready to cooperate	We assumed the aims and commitments were similarly shared	As above, these are a priority and must be attended to – they are likely to be achieved as an outcome of (robust) face-to-face discussions in the early stages of the research conceptualization and design
The capacities of the collaborators complement each other	Again this was assumed to be the case – on reflection, it proved to be a reasonable one, although it was based on shared academic interests, rather than on any particular skill sets each member held (or otherwise)	Again, a matter for determination early in the project and probably best achieved through face-to-face dialogue

Despite sharing research interests and the focus of this research project in particular, each of the researchers came from very different contexts - culturally, institutionally, and academically. It is clear, in considering the “suggestions” made in the table above, that the major and critical missing elements in our research collaboration was a face-to-face meeting (or more than one) very early on in the project’s conceptualization and planning. Such a meeting(s) can facilitate the development of sound personal and professional relationships, the sharing and understanding of specific operational and research contexts of members, and the overall development of sound conceptual underpinnings of the research and its implementation. We now see this as essential for the initiation and conduct of a successful project such as we attempted. Should financial support for this be difficult, it may be possible to agree to attend a common international conference at which such discussions might take place – this would be highly possible in a case such as this when the partners share so many academic interests. A further face-to-face meeting somewhere in the middle of the project, once some data have been collected and researchers have had a chance to read over the transcripts / summaries, would also be useful, and could allow some early drafting of papers and articles for publication and presentation. This more personalised interaction, rather than email, could assist in developing relationships, bonding the team more closely, and encouraging a greater commitment to project goals and agreed outcomes.

Concluding comments

In this paper we challenge the orthodoxy of multi-institutional, collaborative research as a logical – and, by inference, easy – extension to the solitude of the ivory tower. We believe that such research is a highly complex and demanding extension to the academic's role, and have outlined the processes and issues that beset an international collaborative research team. Our belief is that the interactions and communication issues were, in many ways, more challenging than the research itself. Such a belief emphasizes the importance of building collaborator relationships, facilitating team cohesion, and structuring the research such that the focus is clear, timelines and outcomes are agreed upon, and commitment in light of competing priorities delivered.

Conrad (1998) has alluded to the need for effective staff development in research, as it is a core component within an environment in which universities are competing for research funding and having to document staff productivity. The experiences as outlined in this paper suggest that developing understandings of the challenges inherent in undertaking international collaborative research might well be a required component of such professional development. The reflections and suggestions offered in the summary table above can contribute in that regard.

Despite the somewhat negative sense that this reflection on our experiences may convey, as researchers we are convinced that the synergies gained and the valuable comparative learning that took place make overcoming these challenges a worthwhile process. The understandings we have gained of the contexts of our three countries, and specifically of the three cities in which we conducted our research, have contributed to our own scholarly growth. There is always a need to contextualize one's research in the place where that work is being conducted. The opportunity to have one's interpretations examined and questioned by two colleagues with little or no prior understanding of that context was a major benefit of the collaboration. Through our being required to defend and explain the taken-for-granted assumptions that often underlay our interpretations, we came to a better understanding of the data with which we were working. Further, the insights revealed in those instances where the data indicated similarities of experience, irrespective of culture or geography, were very useful to our processes of conceptualization and theorizing.

In the longer term, there remains a challenge of ongoing collaborations among this particular research team. Whether it remains as a collaboration that is relatively stable and, in the long term, one that survives change as Smith talks about (2001, p. 144), is yet to be tested. We have learned from this process and are planning on investing some funds in bringing the three of us together for an intensive week of conversation and writing. We are exploring the potentiality of video-teleconferencing as another means of bringing visual connectivity to our conversations. We are discussing international conferences to which we may travel individually, and yet have the opportunity to meet as a group. It is likely that collective endeavours may well survive the myriad of challenges as identified here which are ever present in such international collaborations.

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