

The difficult art of partnership and institutional commitment

Larsen, C.E.S.

University of Copenhagen, Rolighedsvej 23, DK-1958 Frederiksberg C, Denmark

Corresponding author: kesl@life.ku.dk

Abstract

This paper looks at two aspects of institutional development in a university setting. It looks at how the design of South – North collaboration may have a bearing on the type of partnership¹ that evolves. And it addresses the issue of how institutional commitment influences the depth and intensity of change processes. The paper will firstly examine the underlying assumptions that guide designs of South – North collaboration and how both deliberate and unintended consequences may influence the nature of the partnership between the involved institutions, especially while evolving and expanding such partnerships. The paper will also address the issue of institutional commitment as the impact of partnerships to a large degree depends on the breadth and depth of the institutional commitment. The aim is to identify the essential elements of institutional commitment in successful partnerships for institutional change. Finally, it will provide recommendations for best practise in establishing partnerships with institutional commitment within the university sector.

Key words: Africa, Higher Education, Institutional arrangement, Partnerships, South-North collaboration

Résumé

Cet article se penche sur deux aspects du développement institutionnel dans un cadre universitaire. Il examine comment la conception de la collaboration Sud - Nord peut avoir une incidence sur le type de partenariat¹ qui évolue. Et elle aborde la question de la façon dont l'engagement institutionnel influe sur la profondeur et l'intensité des processus de changement. L'article examinera d'abord les hypothèses sous-jacentes qui guident les modèles de collaboration Sud - Nord et comment les conséquences à la fois délibérées et inattendues peuvent influencer sur la nature du partenariat entre les institutions concernées, en particulier, tout en élaborant et en élargissant de tels partenariats. L'article abordera également la question de l'engagement institutionnel puisque l'impact des partenariats dans une large mesure dépend de la largeur et la profondeur de

¹ A **partnership** is defined here as an arrangement where parties agree to cooperate to advance their mutual interests.

l'engagement institutionnel. L'objectif est d'identifier les éléments essentiels de l'engagement institutionnel dans des partenariats réussis pour le changement institutionnel. Enfin, il fournira des recommandations pour une meilleure pratique dans l'instauration des partenariats avec engagement institutionnel dans le secteur universitaire.

Mots clés: Afrique, enseignement supérieur, arrangement institutionnel, partenariats, collaboration Sud-Nord

Part 1: Fostering South-North Collaboration

Evolution of South – North collaboration and its impact on partnerships. To start the discussion one question should be addressed “*to what degree does the type of partnership have a bearing on the outcome of the partnership?*”

Phase I. The early years of support to the African university sector (1970 – 1990). This is a capital intensive phase where focus is on construction of physical infrastructure. The North partner is generally the contract holder with the donor and provides mainly Technical Assistance (TA) support to design, construction and equipping of the facilities. Designs tend to be built on international standards for universities and seldom customised to local needs and available resources.

The process during this phase was almost entirely donor driven, as the South institutions were young, weak and heavily dependent on external support to function. Decisions were made by the experts from abroad in a somewhat colonial atmosphere. During this phase the Partnership was not really a South – North partnership but primarily a Client – Patron relationship.

Alongside the establishment of the physical infrastructure teaching is initiated. In the early years the teaching is again heavily dependent on external lecturers mainly from European countries. The majority of the local lectures were undergoing training abroad and expatriates were functioning as mentors and gap fillers in the interim period. Such staff exchange between South and North established many lifelong friendships and scientific collaborations, which in return created an atmosphere of respect and trust –both prerequisites for balanced partnerships.

As the South researchers graduated with MSc and PhD degrees they returned home and started taking over teaching obligations from the expatriates. Gradually long-term TA support was phased out symbolising that the establishment phase was completed.

Phase II. From technical support towards more equal collaboration (1990 – on going). From the mid 1990 donors start to experiment with different South driven funding modalities with the objective to create more local ownership. However, South – North partnerships continue to remain asymmetric as more Client – Patron like types of relationship.

Part of the reason seems to be that the North partner continues to act as a proxy for the Donor in the majority of donor funded projects. This means that the North partner not only retains the main decision power but also executes financial control and stipulates work conditions on behalf of the donor. This leaves the South partner in a more passive receiver position with limited control over the governing principles of the cooperation.

Another reason is that the South partners add to the inequality or imbalance of the partnership by not being proactive and sharp in articulating priorities and demands. In competitive funding situations many South universities tend to be free riders or deliver inputs to joint South – North proposals of inferior quality. This culture of slow and inadequate response and articulation of demands might be a negative heritage from decades of North driven Patron – Client partnerships. But it might also just be unfortunate habits of convenience, letting the North partner handle the trouble with the administrative burden.

At times the Overseas Development Aid (ODA) systems themselves unintentionally add to the imbalance of South – North partnerships. Most donors including the Danish DANIDA wish to align to the Paris Declaration and the Accra Accord in regards to South ownership. But due to domestic governmental financing mechanisms, most donors work under time pressure resulting in tight deadlines for planning and disbursement of funds. To comply with these requirements they push for fast decisions and university partners tend to fall into their old roles of North being first movers and South following as more passive receivers.

Another challenge is that ODA is very sensitive to negative press, forcing the public donor agencies to be risk adverse by focusing more on 'procedure' than 'progress' and more on 'avoiding failure' than 'achieving success'.

All these intertwined and interlinked factors form part of the reason why despite the trend in ODA towards more South dictated, demand driven agendas, South – North partnerships have not become more balanced, or even for a while, skewed to the advantage of the South.

Phase III. From individual to institutional capacity building (2005 – on going). Recent years have seen the occurrence of a trend towards more focused partnerships in the university sector. From scattered researcher-to-researcher collaborations the trend seems to be that both South and North want more institutional anchoring. One of the reasons might be the limited impact individual partnerships tend to have. Another reason is that individual collaborations are naturally vulnerable to change in key players.

It is valuable to examine the difference between individually anchored and institutionally anchored partnerships, to see if this might affect the type of partnerships that evolves.

DFID (2010) reflects like this: *Capacity building is the broadest term but it is rarely clear whether it refers merely to individuals or covers also institutions or, as the case is in some instances, the policy environment in which higher education and research takes place.*

In this paper Research Capacity Building is understood to target *individuals* and Institutional Capacity Building *organisations*. Using Milan's (2001) definition: "*Institutional capacity is the ability of institutions or systems to perform appropriate functions effectively, efficiently and sustainably*". That means that Institutional Capacity Building addresses all functions of a university, as illustrated in Figure 1.

The reason for making a clear distinction is that activities on the individual level do not necessarily lead to impact on the institutional level. Hydén (2010) looked at experience of donor funding within higher education and research and he concluded that: *Support for specific departments tends to be project-based and linked to institutional cooperation with a*

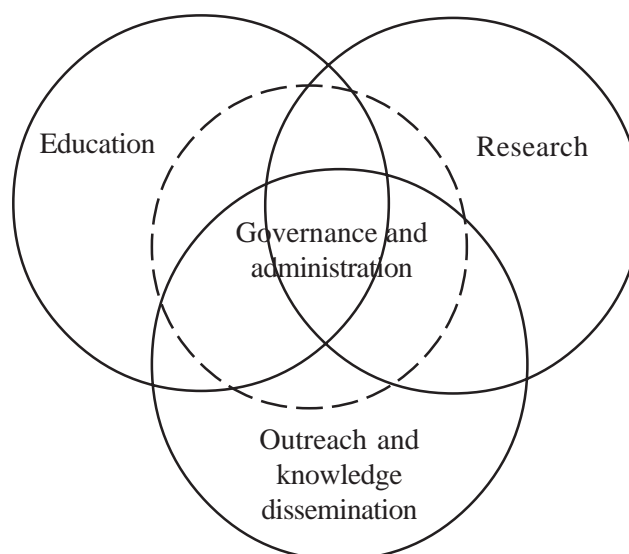


Figure 1. Classic view on the organisation of a university's main functions and overlaying structures (authors drawing).

corresponding department at a university in the North, although, again, there is readiness to extend this to involving South-South cooperation as well. Because support at departmental level tends to be driven by individual scholars it tends to be research-based and benefit first and foremost those directly involved in such projects (Hydén, 2010).

Emerging lessons. South – North partnerships with the aim of strengthening South universities has existed for more than 50 years. Progress has been less than expected and some of the possible reasons have been discussed here.

We have seen that the type of partnership established has a bearing on the outcome of the partnership. Establishing an atmosphere of respect and trust among involved staff seem instrumental for success. As Hjortsoe (2010) writes: *project success is often based on reciprocity, trust, mutual understanding and enthusiasm*. Furthermore it can be concluded that the disbursement urgency, short project periods and a 'fear of failure' culture with most donor agencies often act counterproductive to the objective of establishing long lasting equal partnerships. Finally, it seems there might be potential for broader impact by shifting focus from individuals to institutional level. But before elaborating more on that, it would be beneficial to look at the issue of institutional commitment.

Part II. Institutional Arrangements

How institutional commitment influences change processes. Partnerships were about advancing mutual benefits but not necessarily about promoting change. Having said that, many South – North partnerships are instigated by a wish to improve situations and conditions predominantly among the Southern partners. That means that they are about joint efforts to facilitate and stimulate change processes.

To address this issue it is relevant to ask: “*Does the institutional commitment in a South – North partnership have a bearing on the outcome of the change process they want to facilitate?*”

A change process is the process of moving from a ‘less desired’ situation to a ‘more desired’ situation. The moving is what you do and the process is how you do it. But before addressing the ‘what’ and ‘how’ in a change process it would be relevant to look at the why or the justification for change and on the issue of who will do it.

In doing so it might be relevant draw on some classical literature within Change Management. Here using Harvard professor Kotter (1996) who works with an eight step model for Change Management:

1. Establish a sense of necessity for change, the so called ‘burning platform’
2. Establish a winning coalition
3. Develop a vision and a strategy to achieve the vision
4. Communicate the vision
5. Strengthen the competences of the staff
6. Harvest low hanging fruits to gain early wins
7. Consolidate achievements

Of relevance here are mainly the first two critical steps: (1) Establishing the urge to change, addressing the ‘why’ and (2) a strong coalition that can carry through the change process, addressing the ‘who’ issue.

Why change? According to Douglas (1990) it is part of human nature not to change unless one personally experiences a need to change or is convinced by others that one needs to change. This is because, by virtue, humans are risk averse and change encompasses risk. To be willing to change the individual must therefore experience or be convinced by others that the risk of

status quo is greater than the risk of moving. This is what Kotter calls a 'burning platform'. If the individuals are not convinced about this by themselves, external behavioural regulating factors are required to move them. This can be in the form of disincentives that push them to change or incentives that pull them in a new direction, or a combination of the two. However if people are stimulated to change by behavioural regulators but not convinced about the need to change, the risk is that it only works as long as disincentive and incentive structures are in place and functioning.

If the above arguments are correct it means that in order to instigate a change process in an organisation, timing has to coincide with a widespread feeling of the need to change among relevant stakeholders. Alternatively the 'need to change' has to be formulated by the ones who want change and convincingly communicated to the ones who need to change. This is where it gets tricky when one wants to have broad institutional commitment. In most cases the ones who want change and the ones who need change are not the same people - this also seems true in a university setting.

Induced change processes therefore have to be carefully planned and orchestrated to be successful. Justification and communication becomes a key factor, especially in the early stage of a change process. If people have a feeling that this is not well thought through or this is not relevant to me or has little institutional legitimacy they will not buy into the change process. As a result institutional commitment is not achieved.

Who can facilitate change? The most relevant internal stakeholders within a university change process are listed in Figure 2. These are the three staff types: Senior Management, Faculty and Administration/Support staff.

The fourth and very important internal stakeholders in a university setting are the students. They can become both drivers and inhibitors of change processes. This group is a difficult and partly unpredictable stakeholder to deal with. Students have a lot of power and if dealt properly with they can become strong supporters and drivers of change processes. However, if they feel that their concerns and demands are not taken into account they can efficiently obstruct things.

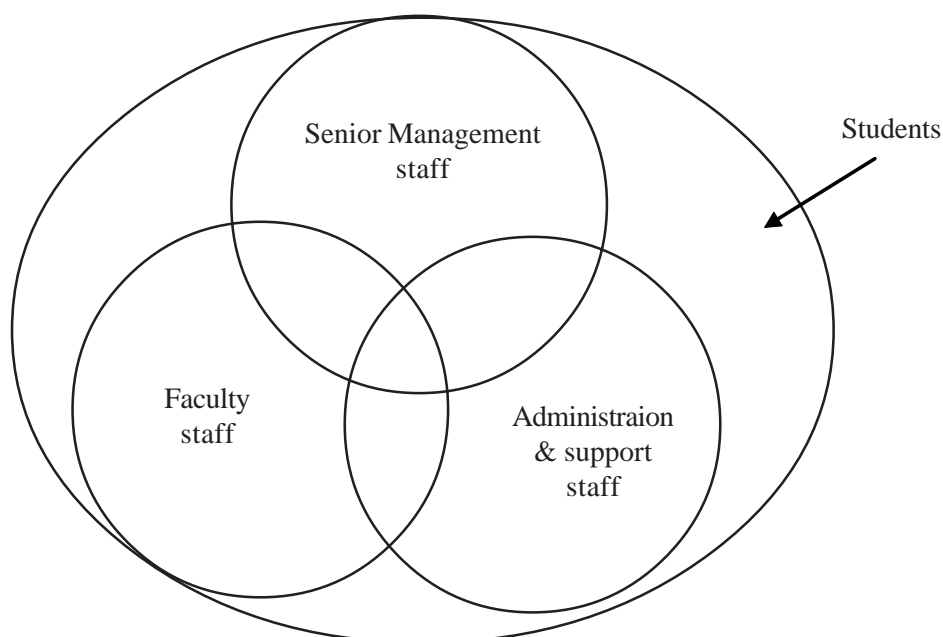


Figure 2. The main internal stakeholder groups in a university change process (authors drawing).

Anyone who wants to facilitate change within a university setting must at least take all these internal stakeholders into account when forming a so-called winning alliance with broad institutional commitment. Depending on the character of the change process it might also be strategically relevant to bring external stakeholders on board. This could be from e.g.: ministries, local public institutions, private sector representatives, civil society representatives or NGO's.

Top down or bottom up? Changes initiated by senior management at university level often suffer from anticipation that staff and students see the same necessity to change as senior management do. Therefore the communication strategy and argumentation is based on management's worldview and not the views of staff and students. Aggravating this misconception is the fact that what is perceived as being of benefit to the organisation in the long run (i.e. the management's concern) can be seen to have negative impact on individuals (i.e. staff and students) in the short run. Thus change processes initiated and driven from the top often fail to create institutional commitment because of resistance at lower level. Still power and resources are strong drivers that at times can push through even rather unpopular changes.

Part III. Designing future Collaborative Initiatives as a Way Forward

Bottom up initiatives in university settings often crashes because they are driven mainly by enthusiastic individuals. Such people have a lot of drive and commitment but might not have sufficient formal and informal power themselves nor have they ensured alliances with people who possess this power. Many partnerships e.g. related to Research Capacity Development are anchored around faculty staff. Impact of such partnerships is often limited by institutional barriers, which they find themselves unable to address because the alliance they have formed for the partnership does not include key players from administration and senior management. Thus change processes initiated and driven from the bottom often fail to create institutional commitment because of lack of commitment at senior management level.

Emerging lessons. Institutional commitment does seem to have an impact on the capacity of South – North partnerships to facilitate change. However, most South – North partnerships does not pay adequate attention to the importance of bringing all relevant stakeholders on-board to facilitate the changes that they have been instigated to bring about. This might be because such partnerships are perceived as more cumbersome to establish and manage, regardless of whether they are established by senior management or faculty staff members.

Ways forward. A relevant question to prompt this discussion could be: *“How to design South – North partnerships that build on existing experience while trying to avoid the pitfalls of design errors that often lead to*

Unfortunately there is no blue print on how to do this. However, some general experiences towards successful designs and processes have evolved:

Systematic preparation. The value of systematic preparation in developing an argumentation and communication strategy addressing all stakeholders’ concerns as well as forming broad alliances cannot be underestimated. If sound preparation is coupled with a design that allows high flexibility as well as sensitivity to different responses to the instigated change during implementation, some of the most critical preconditions for success are in place.

Successful collaboration with external stakeholder. South – North partnerships does bring a powerful external stakeholder

into the game. Senior management at South universities can use the North partner to assist in smoothen the way forward to get broad support within the university and faculty staff can use the external partner to get senior management on-board. The North partner can facilitate that also administrative and service staff, is brought in. Administrative staff has a critical role in institutionalising the change by embedding it in the formal and informal rules and regulations of the university. Still, they are often forgotten in the equation of partnership building.

Example of a concrete tool. A very powerful tool to create strong engagement among university staff is direct financial support from the Vice Chancellor's office especially in the initial phase of a new South –North partnership. Apparently this is not common in most South universities. Internally it shows senior management trust in faculty and administrative staff's capabilities. Externally it signals that the university takes these partnerships very seriously and is committed at institutional level. Senior management's confidence towards its staff seems to spark creation of innovative ideas and careful consideration of such ideas, increasing the ability to produce and win highly competitive international calls for proposals. In return this multiplies the initial investment by the Vice Chancellors office and increases the revenue of the university.

List of conditions. Discussions of these issues with colleagues from South and North has brought about the following list of conditions which should be considered when establishing new partnerships or restructuring old ones:

- 1) Then introducing new more institutional capacity building initiative they should where possible be designed so they create synergies with on-going more individual focused capacity building efforts (e.g. within research) to create broad support and interest.
- 2) Facilitate inclusive processes that involve a broad array of relevant stakeholders from faculty staff, administration and management to create institutional ownership, and collaboration as key instead of the traditional Kingdom building.
- 3) Avoid partnerships being centred around and governed by funding from a single donor. This leads to donor conditions stipulating the partnership.

- 4) Centre partnerships on areas of mutual interest (not just money) and then jointly seek multiple sources of external funding.
- 5) Be willing to carry and share initial investment costs at institutional level as it creates real commitment at implementation level and increases ownership of the joint achievements.
- 6) Ensure fair (not necessarily equal) representation of all partners in all governing structures within the partnership.

Experience shows that South – North partnerships that build on the above principles, do have a positive impact on the outcome of the partnership. It promotes confidence and commitment. Such spirit of renewed commitment seems to lead to gradual change in attitudes and practices of university staff . Involved staff becomes more proactive in overcoming institutional barriers by reaching up and down, thereby minimising hierarchical gaps and enhancing information sharing and mutual understanding.

University Management is recommended to look favourably on South – North partnerships whose teams embrace a spirit of mutual partnership and ownership, with an institutional approach that is inclusive rather than exclusive towards different stakeholder groups.

Forming South –North partnerships and initiating a change process in a university setting is no big deal, it happens every day, but doing it in a way that creates institutional commitment and has significant lasting positive impact on the universities involved is indeed an art.

References

- DFID, 2010. Capacity Building in Research: A DFID Practice Paper. London: DFID, June. <http://growthandemployment.org/uploads/publikationer/How%20To%20Note%20Research%20Capacity%20Building.pdf>
- Hjortsoe, C.N. 2010. Project management in research capacity building projects - A REVIEW of management experiences, challenges, and opportunities in ENRECA projects. http://ddrn.dk/papers_and_reports-research-overviews.html
- Hydén, G. 2010. Mapping the world of higher education and research funders: Actors, models, mechanisms and programs. DDRN and Universities Denmark (DU). http://ddrn.dk/papers_and_reports-research-overviews-mapping-the-world-of-higher-education.html

Larsen, C.E.S. et al.

- Milan, A. 2001. What do we know about capacity building? An overview of existing knowledge and good practice, Department of Health Service Provision. Geneva, World Health Organisation. <http://whqlibdoc.who.int/hq/2001/a76996.pdf>
- North, D.C. 1990. Institutions, Institutional Change and Economic Performance, Cambridge University Press.