

International Partnerships for Academic Research and Exchange: Ethical Implications

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Abstract: In this era of globalization, international academic partnerships for both developed and developing countries are vital for the enhancement of scientific evidence and knowledge. Conducting research in other countries and developing exchange programs for faculty and students can result in monetary, professional, and personal satisfaction as well as enhance the reputation, standing and visibility of academic institutions. Ethical implications permeate the process of developing and implementing international partnerships and are necessary for fair and reciprocal academic research and exchanges. International partners who closely adhere to ethical guidelines benefit all the stakeholders. Partners who do not focus on ethical principles can exploit their counterparts, even if unintentionally. The purpose of this paper is to raise awareness of the need to create strict ethical guidelines associated with implementing international partnerships for conducting research and exchanging faculty and students with host countries in the developing world.

Key words: partnerships, international, ethics, respect, Higher Education Institutions

1. Introduction

The increasingly interconnected world of the 21st century presents a number of challenges requiring experts from different national contexts to analyze problems, propose solutions and strategies that are grounded in scientific evidence. Effective global partnerships between the developed and developing world are an important component in the development of evidence-based knowledge and collective action (Carbonnier & Kontinen, 2014).

Now is the time to review and expand the scope of international partnerships and to enhance the internationalization of research and higher education between the developed and developing world. This movement toward international partnerships has two themes: (i) *academic internationalization* — a process that involves outward engagement and internal restructuring; and (ii) *academic positioning* — the need for academic institutions to differentiate themselves within the new global systems of higher education (Sutton & Obst, 2011).

This reality has contributed to a change in the landscape of international academic partnerships. In this new era of international partnerships, it is more important than ever to ensure that the result of these relationships is

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mutually beneficial. Unfortunately, ethical issues are rarely fully thought through upfront — when the partnership is scoped, planned, and initially executed. When partners do not follow ethical guidelines, stakeholders in the project can be exploited. Exploitation usually occurs in partnerships involving vulnerable populations and in academic and research centers in the developing world. The purpose of this paper is to raise awareness of the need to create strict ethical guidelines associated with implementing international partnerships for conducting research and exchanging faculty and students with host countries in the developing world.

2. Definition of Terms

It is important to clarify some key terms used in this paper to better understand the development and implementation processes associated with international partnerships that occur in conjunction with internationalization of Higher Education Institutions (HEIs).

(1) Internationalization: Two aspects of the internationalization process exist:

- *Inward-looking:* “the process of integrating an international/cultural dimension into the teaching, research, and service functions of the institution” (Knight, 1994);
- *Outward-looking:* “the process to integrate the institution into the emerging global knowledge and learning network” (Hawawini, 2011).

(2) Partnerships

- ... occur when “[t]wo or more Higher Education Institutions (HEIs) are committed to collaborate on several initiatives: faculty & students exchanges, joint educational programs; joint research. The partners should agree on key issues: purpose, scope, exclusivity, finance, and governance” (Hawawini, 2011);
- ... include “[r]eciprocity between/among two or more Higher Education Institutions (HEIs) where actions should be based on mutual respect and seek mutual benefit between/among the institutional partners” (Umoren, James, & Litzelman, 2012).

(3) Exploitation

- ... occurs “[w]hen one person or group uses another person or group to gain advantage. It is more likely to happen when there is a pre-existing unequal relationship by reasons of wealth, class, education, gender, race” (Fitzgerald & Wasunna, 2005).

An emphasis on the concept of exploitation in this context is critical. The terms *internationalization* and *partnership* are often part of proposals, whereas the term *exploitation* and the need to make reasonable accommodations to avoid exploitation among partners with differing power and economic abilities is often missing from the proposal language. A critical analysis of proposals often reveals underlying power differentials within the proposal language that unfairly benefit partners with more power and economic resources. This reality can lead to the exploitation of partners in the actual initiatives and activities. Therefore, in order to prevent or diminish exploitation in partnerships, it is important to understand the process and dimensions of internationalization and partnership, as well as, the motives, benefits and obstacles involved in developing and implementing them.

3. Internationalization Process and Dimension

The internationalization of higher education systems is a multi-dimensional process. According to Hawawini

(2011), the process can be understood from two levels:

(1) *The Institutional International Reach*: There are multiple layers involved in the international expansion of HESs. Namely, geopolitical determination to initiate the international experience; the cost-benefits of the international initiatives, the steps to undertake the internationalization process; and the models to be used to implement the internationalization strategy. There are multiple models deployed in these contexts, including: **import model** — bring the world to the campus; **export model** — send faculty and students to foreign universities; **academic joint-venture model** — development of academic programs or curricula as a joint ventures, in this way the graduates can have co-signed degrees or separate degrees; **partnership model** — collaboration in several initiatives: exchange of faculty and students, joint academic programs, joint faculty research; **foreign-campus model** — university physical presence abroad-campus or gateway offices;

(2) *The Institutional Richness*: In this level, there are two key concepts that must be understood. **Cultural dominance**: create a balance where there is no culture dominant in the campus. **Institutional and individual assimilation**: create a balance between educational needs of its local market and the global market, and eliminate the tendency of dominant nationality or culture.

4. Motives, Benefits and Obstacles of the Internationalization

According to Hawawini (2011), the forces that drive a Higher Education Institution (HEI) to internationalize align around four key dimensions. **Academic**: the understanding that education and research have a world-wide scope; **Economic**: identification of new sources of revenue and growth; **Political**: need to influence potential and actual opinion leaders of host countries; and/or **Religious**: need to spread the faith of a specific religious organization.

Hawawini (2011) also emphasizes some of the motives, benefits and obstacles a higher education institution (HEI) takes into consideration regarding academic and economic internationalization:

(1) *Academic Motives to Internationalize*: to accomplish the institution's educational mission; to retaining academically relevant in an interconnected world that is becoming rapidly global; to bring the best students and faculty worldwide;

(2) *Academic Obstacles to Internationalize*: lack of faculty interest and dilution of the institution's reputation;

(3) *Economic Benefits of Internationalize*: to grow more revenues; reduce operating risk by diversifying geographically; additional funding for activities in the home campus;

(4) *Economic Obstacles to Internationalize*: international initiatives in general are risky and can be very expensive; financial support from international alumni usually may be lower (than domestic alumni).

5. International Partnerships Process and Dimensions

Since partnerships are a key part of the internationalization process, it is important to consider the components of partnerships' development and implementation. According to Sutton & Obst (2011) the dimensions of an international partnership are:

(1) *Transactional/Incidental*: focus is mainly on exchange of students & faculty, and each institution remains essentially separate and unaffected by this initiative.

(2) *Transformational/Strategic* — the main focus is on mutual transformation of the partners by developing strong executive sponsorship and oversight, collaborative strategic planning, and/or leveraging resources and

interconnections to drive institutional growth and produce collaborative learning during the entire process.

6. Motives to Develop International Partnerships

Like the internationalization of HEIs, there are motives, costs, and obstacles in the process to develop and implement international partnerships. According to Sutton & Obst (2011), the motives can be:

(1) Academic Motives

- Disseminate the overall mission of the institution
- Curriculum development and course enhancement
- Offer international learning experiences
- Students learning process, as a global citizens and as future members of global workforce
- Developing international capacity for faculty and staff
- Enhance research opportunities

(2) Economic Motives

- Bringing more revenue through tuition and grants
- Sharing resources or reducing costs

(3) Geo-Political Motives

- Promote public diplomacy and other national priorities
- Support and expand international ties and the involvement of communities
- Enhanced involvement in key parts of the world
- Addressing global issues in health, education, economic development, environment, energy, conflict, inequality, human rights, and social justice
- Directing the global system of higher education in beneficial ways

According to Wright (2000), Wright et al. (2005), Philpott (2010), Umoren, James, & Litzelman (2012), some of the main obstacles in developing and implementing an international partnership for research and/or exchange of faculty and students are:

- Language skills
- Cultural barriers
- Lack faculty/students experience working with vulnerable populations
- Lack faculty/students experience working with limited resources
- Lack of clear objectives, results, and products among all stakeholders
- Lack of systematic communication, monitoring and evaluation
- Lack of continuity and sustainability
- Lack of appropriate informed consent documents and the absence of local institutional review boards
- Difficulty demonstrating the purpose of informed consent requirements
- Individualistic decision-making processes on research studies
- Difficulty discerning individual priorities, autonomy and privacy versus moral considerations

According to Wright et al. (2005), Wright et al. (2005), Van de Walter, Green, Cook (2008); Kinser & Green (2009), and Sutton & Obst (2011), it is essential to develop an institutional framework to guide partnerships that integrate key elements in the development and implementation of an international partnership. This is necessary to ensure mutual benefits (especially for the host party in developing countries):

- Creating a culture of sharing power, interest, knowledge, and leadership
- Using existing affiliations and experiences
- Creating processes for approval of partnership
- Integrating overall partnership goals and strategies
- Emphasizing a *culture* of partnership
- Developing policies, procedures and organizational structures for managing partnerships
- Offering baseline financial and other support
- Creating effective steps for initiating the process of partnerships
- Developing Memoranda of Understanding (MOU) and the implementation of Strategic Plans (SP)
- Organizing training seminars for faculty and students who will participate in the partnership
- Identifying effective practices for sustaining partnerships over time
- Creating procedures for reviewing, revising, and/or terminating partnerships

Since the late 20th century, a growing number of international and global health programs have been created in Higher Education Institutions (HEIs) in the developed world. Usually, these educational programs offer field experiences, as well as some incentives to conduct research studies abroad. Foundations and government and non-governmental organizations have also increased their interest in applying their technical expertise and resources in addressing global health challenges and disparity issues abroad. These different initiatives can be problematic and also raise ethical concerns. To avoid these difficulties, a Working Group on *Ethics Guidelines for Global Health Training (WEIGHT)* was created in 2010, to address ethical issues and the best practice guidelines for all stakeholders involved in Global Health Training Programs (Crump, Sugarman, and the Working Group on Ethics Guidelines for Global Health Training (WEIGHT, 2010). Umoren, James, Litzelman (2012, p. 2) summarized the WEIGHT initiative in the following elements:

- Existence of a Memorandum of Understanding (MOU) between institutions.
- Consideration of local needs and priorities in program activities.
- Learner activities and supervision that correspond to the level of training.
- Costs and benefits to host considered or assessed.
- Pre-departure training for learners on sociocultural, political, and historical aspects of host country, community and research ethics (if applicable).
- Met host and sending country requirements on licensing standards, visa policies, privacy and security of patient information, and so forth.
- Obtained local ethics committee approval for research activities (if applicable).
- Inclusion or acknowledgement of host input in authorship of publications or presentations

7. How to Make Moral Progress in International Partnerships?

The guidelines prepared by WEIGHT are very important. However, they alone are not enough. Much more needs to be done by academia and researchers. The need for additional effort is supported by both national and international conference presentations and publications that contain glaring omissions of ethical issues in the development of international partnerships for research or exchange of faculty and students. Benater & Singer (2000); Wright et al. (2005) and Philpott (2010) posited that the inclusion of the following elements in developing and implementing an international partnership are essential to avoid exploitation and unethical issues:

- Increase awareness of ethical implications for any kind of international collaborations.
- Be sensitive to the social, economic and political situation of the stakeholders involved in the international partnership.
- Facilitate the counterparts members to take the lead in the decision-making process of strategic planning and implementation.
- Organize educational professional training, materials and research studies conducted in the host country relevant to host country needs.
- Work with national, regional and local authorities for sustainability of the results and products.
- Create trust and transparency to build achievements.
- Share profits, information and network equitably.
- Disseminate and apply the results at local, regional, national, and international levels.
- Monitor and evaluate the international partnership.
- Share power, interest, knowledge, and leadership.

Thus far, we discussed the need for Higher Education Institutions (HEIs) to take into account ethical concerns when developing and implementing international partnerships especially when the partnership is between a developed and developing country. While a body of literature recognizes the existence of these needs, concerns related to new and existing international partnerships still exist. The capacity to move international partnerships toward relevant issues for capacity-building and research and away from exploitation require that both developed and developing countries join forces in equitable and respectful ways to share power, interest, knowledge, and leadership with all stakeholders involved in the partnership (Wright, 2000; Umoren, James, Litzelman, 2012; Carbonnier, Kontinen, 2014). Breda & Wright (2011) also emphasize the importance of more egalitarian, trustful, respectful, and dignity-engendering principles to achieve a democratic collaboration among different stakeholders.

With increased globalization, countries such as Singapore, Qatar, and United Arab Emirates are developing new styles of partnerships with the developed world. These countries are interested in becoming regional educational hubs and thus they are inviting foreign HEIs to their countries to create campuses in their territories. These invitations are very attractive because these countries can support research locally as well as with HEIs at their home campuses (Olds, 2007; Hawawini, 2011).

Moving in the same direction, Brazil has created a program called “*Science without Borders*” (recently renamed “*Brazil Scientific Mobility Program*”). Through this initiative Brazil offers 100,000 scholarships to the best Brazilian undergraduate and graduate students in the fields of science, technology, engineering, and mathematics to study at top universities in the developed world. The universities in Canada, US, and Europe are competing to partner with Brazil to receive these students (Brazil Scientific Mobility, 2015).

What is becoming increasingly clear is that international partnerships will no longer be initiated exclusively by HEIs in the developed world. Today, HEIs from the developing world are becoming important actors in initiating international partnerships and the governments of those countries are using these partnerships as a strategy to advance science & technology in their countries and to prepare future leaders of these nations. As a result of initiatives such as those described above, partners from both the developed and developing world will be seen more and more as equal and reciprocal partners in the development of science & technology.

8. Final Considerations

In a globalized world, international partnerships initiated by both the developed and the developing world are needed. In the process of internationalizing higher education, these partnerships are a strategic element required to address the many challenges institutions face. It allows them to take advantage of opportunities that facilitate expansion of teaching, research and service. International partnerships require an institution to seek quality, while expanding its cosmopolitan nature.

Ethical and reciprocal partnerships involve cooperation and demands that all of those involved work fairly toward common goals. When these elements are missing, exploitative and unethical relationships can occur. Instituting basic rules for Higher Education Institutions to follow when creating ethical international partnerships for research and exchange of faculty and students can be very effective. For example, developing a principle that prohibits “power over” relationships and includes all partners in the decision making process can produce far more equitable outcomes for all parties.

Before going global, Higher Education Institutions in developed countries can benefit from learning at home. They can promote local, regional and national field experiences in their own countries thus addressing the needs of vulnerable populations and communities and aim for sustainable development in their own countries. Through in-country field experiences, faculty, students and researchers can focus on sharing power, knowledge and leadership within in-country partners. They will be better able to develop sensitivity and awareness regarding poverty, inequality and other issues before to going abroad where it will be imperative that they share power, interest, knowledge and leadership with their host partners.

The purpose of this paper was to raise awareness of the need to create strict ethical guidelines associated with implementing international partnerships for conducting research and exchanging faculty and students with host countries in the developing world. Our hope is that the information presented in this paper will guide many who are involved in partnerships and for others planning to engage in the richness of ethical international partnerships.

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