

THOUGHTS ON INTERNATIONAL RESEARCH PARTNERSHIPS: HOW SHOULD WE GO ABOUT CREATING AND SUPPORTING THEM?

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ABSTRACT

What is new?	This paper explores internal institutional approaches to support the different types and scales of research partnerships. It identifies three levels of partnership (individual, group or topic, and institutional), and suggests the variations in support each requires.
What was the approach?	The paper is based on personal experiences and observations of practice, originally written as a briefing note for a colleague.
What is the academic impact?	While other papers consider the relationship between the partners, this paper focuses on the activities within an organisation, which will ultimately affect the other members of the partnership. It complements those papers that examine the inter-relationships between the partners.
What is the wider impact?	Practitioners will be able to use these reflections to understand, evaluate and if necessary, evolve their own institution's approach to research partnerships. Funders and policymakers might similarly be able to use them in setting their expectations for the partnerships they create or require.
Keywords	International, Partnerships

INTRODUCTION

Why are we interested in international research partnerships? How do we construct, manage and support them? With whom should our partnerships be?

International Partnerships

All sensible questions, with which many of us will have grappled, along with the often asked and sometimes hard to answer, 'with whom do we already have a relationship or partnership?'

Research partnerships (whether international or not) can exist at, broadly, three levels: individual, group or topic, and institutional. Each of these has its own characteristics and needs, although all successful partnerships depend on respect, trust and aligned interests. Others have also observed these characteristics, for example Davenport et al. (1998) on trust and Garrett-Jones et al. (2010) in relation to competing objectives. Distinctions between individual and institutional relationships are drawn by Ogden & Porter (2000) and illustrated with an interesting story of two contrasting relationships.

The drive for research partnerships is not new, and has been subject to a range of consideration; for example, Perry et al. (2022) and Voller et al. (2022) on subject-based reflections, Yemini (2021) for observations on researcher productivity, Universities UK (2020) for national policy-level requirements, LERU (2023) for approaches to risk management in collaborations, and Dutta et al. (2023) on equitable research partnerships. But how might institutions approach partnerships systematically in what they do internally, consciously recognising the different forms of partnership?

The objective of this paper is to explore the differences between the possible levels of partnership and to consider the questions of internal approach in relation to each level. It seeks to demonstrate the differences and hence the variations in approach needed. Those approaches may be light-touch and facilitative or involve significant institutional commitment and be more directive. It is written primarily with an internal focus: how does an institution respond to a strategic desire to have research partnerships? It does not seek to address the substantial area of trusted research in the context of the global landscape and related regulations.

The terms partnership and collaboration are often used interchangeably, whether in the literature or in policy and procedure. On occasions, a distinction may be drawn: Ogden & Porter (2000) believe that one is required and suggest that partnerships are between individuals and collaborations are between organisations. In this paper, the term partnership is taken, at the group or topic and institutional levels, to be a structural relationship, intended to last for some years. It is more than working together on a single project, which might be termed a collaboration. At the individual level, things are a little more blurred, but a partnership is also taken to mean a long-term relationship, potentially encompassing multiple project or writing collaborations.

This paper originated as a set of thoughts for a colleague, based on experiences and observations of practice, and was the subject of a presentation at the INORMS 2023 Congress in Durban, South Africa.

WHY HAVE INTERNATIONAL RESEARCH PARTNERSHIPS?

A primary, research-driven reason for international research partnerships is likely to be similar to that for national partnerships, or for interdisciplinary research: creating the

combination of skills, expertise, resources and facilities to be able to address interesting, complex questions, leading to societal benefits. Other reasons may relate to institutional strategic objectives involving reputational visibility or engagement with key agenda such as the United Nations' Sustainable Development Goals. There may also be ancillary reasons or benefits, such as:

- Opportunities for staff and research student development
- Possible higher citation rates of internationally co-authored outputs
- Ability to access funding (intellectual critical mass, geographical or collaborative criteria)
- Reputational effects and side-effects relating to academic profile and staff or student recruitment.

Katz & Martin (1997) and Adams (2012, 2013) reflect further on this.

Whilst creating a partnership specifically to be able to access a given source of funding might provide a justification, the funding is only the means to the end of being able to undertake interesting research (that needs to be competitive for that funding). A funding opportunity may provide the basis for a collaboration, but a partnership (in the terms used in this paper) is more than just a collaborative project.

The introduction in the UK of the Global Challenges Research Fund (GCRF) in 2016 (UKRI, 2023) was a significant example of a national policy approach to stimulating collaborative international development activity. Those already involved in relevant research engaged, but so did others who had not previously been involved in such topics or with low- and middle-income countries, thus widening the institutional and disciplinary coverage. The winding up of GCRF after its initial five-year term has left many partnerships in limbo.

Whilst there are good reasons for having international research partnerships, they do also hold challenges. These include the time, effort and cost involved, the range of technical skills needed, the appropriate handling of different organisational and national cultures and regulatory frameworks, and the exposure to the vicissitudes of multiple funding systems.

HOW DO WE CONSTRUCT, MANAGE AND SUPPORT PARTNERSHIPS?

Research is performed by individuals and teams. Any research partnership will be effected through those individuals collaborating over time. Collaborative activities may be enhanced by institutional support, to make engagement easier or to provide access to additional capacity or facilities.

Research partnerships depend on respect, trust, which takes time to build, and aligned interests. Many supported collaborations begin with one or two jointly-funded postgraduate research students. That in itself signals the long-term nature of creating and developing a meaningful research partnership; although it may also reflect a perception of risk, which is another topic.

International Partnerships

Starting with individual partnerships, these are the natural bilateral collaborations that researchers undertake, working with others they perceive as complementary, interesting or beneficial in other ways. Most universities struggle to know the totality of their individual research partnerships.

Supporting individual partnerships might involve: creating space (time / headroom) for exploration, development and communication; enabling travel and accommodating visitors (including, post-pandemic, virtual residence); providing enhanced virtual collaboration environments, e.g. for secure document and data sharing. The activity and the interactions are wholly managed by the individuals themselves. Institutional involvement is very light touch but needs to provide the environment (in all senses); to enable and to allow, not to regulate.

Group or topic-based partnerships involve a number of related interactions between two (or more) partners on a specific topic or subject area. They may develop out of one or more individual partnerships or be catalysed by identification of a good match of interests. Supporting group partnerships might involve: analysis and selection of opportunities for collaboration; funding of focused visits in both directions; provision of postgraduate research scholarships and access to pump-priming funds. The activity and interactions are primarily managed by the group or unit, with some engagement by and support from the institution. Institutional involvement is 'medium touch', given that some investment is involved and that the selected group or topic is likely to be of importance to the institution.

Institutional partnerships are likely to have multiple strands of organised interactions, with engagement by a number of the organisation's subject areas. Such partnerships require significant, on-going institutional commitment and engagement at senior levels. Supporting institutional partnerships might involve: commitment of a budget line over multiple years (e.g. five or more years); dedicated resourcing to support the relationship; regular management and monitoring processes; use of 'preferred collaborator' approaches to funding and similar processes; prioritised commitment of 'matching funds' in support of substantial joint funding proposals. The partnership will generally be managed and co-ordinated by the institution, centrally, with each strand of activity having its own leadership and plan. Institutional involvement is significant and represents a substantive investment. Institutional partnerships often have a strategic value to an institution and tend to be more visible externally than the other forms.

WITH WHOM TO PARTNER?

The identification of potential research partners will depend to an extent on the level one is considering. Individual partnerships may happen naturally, so the institution would not be involved in selection, per se. However, the institution (and others) may have a role in helping to open up networks or facilitate introductions, for example for those less experienced or connected, or across disciplinary areas and potential applications. Group and institutional partnerships do require selection but may be

based on an aggregation of existing individual links or be created ab initio for strategic reasons.

Research partnerships may or may not be geographically agnostic. Some research is geographically focused in itself by the very nature of the topic (e.g. South American flora), or by the choice to consider a topic in the context of a specific geography (e.g. women's rights in Southeast Asia). Some partnerships may seek to be comparative, so will need appropriate partners in different geographical regions. Other partnerships will not require a particular geographical coverage in order to undertake the research, but may still be subject to some geographical influences; for example, to reflect funder requirements or institutional strategic imperatives. Equally, a geographical dimension might be somewhat accidental, based on where a chosen partner happens to be based at the time. Some, perhaps many, individual partnerships result from researchers having worked together in the same location at some point during their career.

Whichever is the starting point, partnerships require consideration of appropriateness: the relationship has to be attractive in both directions and of mutual benefit. The cumulative effect of the partnership also needs to be worth the effort (academic time, management time, cash cost). There is a danger in thinking of collaborating 'up' rather than 'down', as this implies that the other partner will need to collaborate 'down', which thus creates an imbalance, even if only of perception.

Choice of partner also involves consideration of the nature and operating environment of the potential partners. This includes research governance and ethical standards or frames of reference, which often differ across international boundaries. Even between 'similar' countries, variations in regulatory requirements can create obstacles.

Potential group partnerships might be identified by first selecting a small number of groups or topics (two or three) in which the institution has a substantive reputation and reasonable capacity. The groups in question may already have individual links with potential candidate partners. They are also likely to have views on the groups with whom they would like to be able to collaborate. These are important considerations in the context of the respect and trust that will be needed. Also, in terms of the engagement of one's researchers: the motivations need to be right for them as well as for the institution. Finally, it is important to understand the competitive environment and why any given partnership would add value and make a difference.

Institutional partnerships might be formed where there are a number of group level partnerships or where there are a significant number of long-term individual partnerships to form a solid foundation. Hudzik (2015) comments on the transition from individual to institutional partnerships. They may also reflect other areas of partnership, such as educational objectives where the two institutions have begun to understand each other. However, this does not always follow, as we will discuss below.

SOME THINGS TO PONDER

We have now thought about the why, how and with whom. This is, of course, only the starting point, and there are many further aspects to consider. Partnerships are more than a single collaborative project; they are not about a single transaction; they should subsist for some time. That institutions often initiate partnerships with a small number of jointly-funded research studentships signals, but does not necessarily prove, an understanding that a partnership takes time to develop. It takes time to build respect and trust, across multiple people when at the group or institutional level.

Partnerships need to be appropriate, in terms of the people, the topic, the approach, the scale, the timescale, and so on. Research partnerships do not automatically follow a successful relationship in another area of activity: educational and research partnerships are not the same, and one's chosen educational partners are not necessarily the same organisations with whom one would choose to partner from a research perspective (and the feeling might be mutual). Expecting, even forcing, a research partnership to occur could reflect an internal lack of aligned interests and might undermine respect and trust, as well as have negative effects on the partnership. However, there may be economic efficiency reasons for wishing to have both educational and research relationships in an institutional partnership, as Hudzik (2015) notes in the context of an aim of 'comprehensive internationalisation'.

The alignment of interests does not necessarily equate to having identical objectives. Each partner can have different objectives, as long as they are complementary: that the interests represented by the individual objectives pull in the same direction. Indeed, having different but aligned objectives could lead to a more powerful set of outcomes from the partnership. The key here will be transparency of motivations and supporting trust between the partners.

As noted earlier, one of the beneficial effects of partnerships can be the ability to access funding. However, this ought not to be the sole or primary driver for the partnership, in the way it might be for a collaborative project. Many if not most institutions have set themselves targets in relation to research project income, and this can condition behaviours as an end in itself, rather than as a means to the end. Joint success in attracting funding can strengthen a partnership, but it needs to be more than that.

In seeking to identify potential partners at group or institutional level, one might make use of institutional or external data to understand current or past interactions, or where previous staff, researchers or students are now located. For example, one might use bibliometric data to identify with whom one already has substantial co-authorship, e.g. one's primary co-authoring institutions in relevant fields. Before acting on the results, undertake the same exercise from the potential partner's point of view: are you one of their highest co-authoring institutions in those fields? If not, you may not be as attractive a partner to them (based on this measure) as they are to you. However, as with the income example, there may be strong logic for a partnership based on academic expertise and interests, or on a joint impact pathway. As Katz & Martin (1997)

note, co-authorship is a partial indicator of collaborative possibility, and one needs to be aware of fields where co-authorship is driven by involvement in very large, often equipment-based projects.

Continuing with this vein relating to measures and indicators, partnerships might be expressed in multiple different ways, such as: collaborative projects; joint funding; joint PhD supervision; joint degrees; co-authorship; external examining of PhDs; joint editorships; joint investment funds; joint inventions; societal value. Some or all can be relevant, but the benefits of partnerships can be less tangible or measurable. As with all indicators, use them to serve a purpose, not to define your purpose.

Some, perhaps many, partnerships will have an imbalance in access to resources between the partners, be that funds, facilities, data, networks, or influence. This could be between partners in different countries, or within the same country. This needs to be actively recognised, with each contribution being appropriately valued. It may also require action by the better-resourced partner to address the imbalance. This can create challenges and requires a breadth of view and response. As Hudzik (2015) notes, there can be asymmetric partnerships, not only symmetric ones. He suggests the need to 'equilibrate' the value of the benefits, which may be different for each partner, rather than them being unbalanced. Ogden & Porter (2000) make a similar observation about the potential different cost of resources between partners, which does not equate to the value or worth of that resource to the collaboration.

The need to create and curate relationships applies to research managers and administrators (RMAs) as much as to researchers. Inter-institutional networks at strategic and operational levels make research partnerships possible and successful. Indeed, some only happen because of the links embedded in RMA networks.

Whilst these thoughts are principally about supporting partnerships between academic institutions and their researchers, one should not overlook research partnerships with non-academic organisations, such as research institutes (independent or governmental), public bodies and corporations. The research and innovation drivers are likely to have many similarities, and the partnership needs to work for both or all parties.

CONCLUSIONS

Long-term research partnerships are important for individual researchers, groups, and institutions. Institutional support for research partnerships should take a range of forms, reflecting the needs, drivers and scale of the different types of partnership. Supporting bottom-up individual partnerships is just as important as supporting higher-profile, leadership-driven efforts. Enabling partnerships requires nuance as well as capacity.

Whatever the type of partnership and whichever approaches are used, this is all part of creating and providing the institutional environment and culture for research.

Managing the research environment in one organisation is hard enough; doing so across multiple organisations at the same time requires skill, patience and flexibility.

Creating a fair, equitable, and long-lasting partnership is desirable but can be challenging unless an institution is able to take the broadest of views, exercising flexibility in planning, resourcing, decision-making, and the forms and timescales of outcomes.

Ultimately, it is all about respect, trust and alignment of interests; internally as well as externally.

This paper is primarily based on observations of practice. Further insights would be gained by gathering practical experiences from a range of practitioners, be they individual researchers, professional managers of partnerships, policymakers, or institutional leaders. Contrasting the perspectives of these different roles would be as interesting as gaining additional examples of what works and what does not.

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BIOGRAPHY

Ian Carter has over 30 years' experience in research management, across a range of topics and contexts. He is now an independent consultant having worked for three UK universities and in the capital engineering industry. During his career, he has served on a number of national committees, project boards and working groups, including for Research Councils UK, the Scottish and English Funding Councils, Universities UK, Jisc, and HESA, on topics such as full economic costing, grant management systems, open access, research careers, research assessment, and research information management. He is a Chartered Engineer, a Registered Technology Transfer Professional, a former chair of ARMA, a Distinguished Faculty of SRA International, and has been a non-executive director of four companies. He has provided professional advice on all aspects of research management, including strategy, policy, organisational and operational management, and systems, to universities, funders and governments in the UK and elsewhere.

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