



**COLLABORATION
BETWEEN JAPANESE
AND EAST AFRICAN
UNIVERSITIES: CREATING
CONVERSATIONS TO
PROMOTE RESEARCH
AND UNDERSTANDING
AMONG FACULTY
MEMBERS**

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Collaboration Between Japanese and East African Universities: Creating Conversations to Promote Research and Understanding Among Faculty Members

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ABSTRACT

Collaboration between and across universities on a personal rather than an institutional level is an effective way of sharing and learning from each other. All departments can gain from this type of collaborative effort between colleagues of different and even competing institutions. New or inexperienced university lecturers often struggle with the demands of university instruction and research. An exchange of ideas and points of view between instructors of varied levels of experience, or from different disciplines and institutions leads to deep professional growth and creates opportunities for career advancement. This paper will present a brief overview of the literature regarding practice and theory of academic collaboration, examine the benefits of inter- and intra-institutional collaboration, analyze one case study of collaboration between faculty members at three Japanese universities, and present a list of suggestions for implementation of academic collaboration in the East African context.

Keywords: *collaboration, cross-cultural communication, university faculty development*

1.0. INTRODUCTION

Collaboration between academics is an effective way of sharing and learning from each other. Within universities, all departments can gain from this type of collaborative effort between colleagues of different and even competing institutions. In the case of English (as a foreign language) departments and educators in Japan are particularly well-suited to helping each other as there are often strong professional bonds that are formed through professional organizations and social settings. Since there is no perceived competition between universities once students have entered, academics have a bit more leeway to work together across campuses to improve education at all the participating institutions. Groups of university educators find it beneficial to get together and do several things for themselves, their departments, and their respective universities.

There is growing knowledge that “Solitude may stimulate creativity, but scholars do not flourish in isolation. They depend on publishers, librarians, research associates, and most importantly, on one another. ... They are members of a scholarly community without which they would be lost (Cahn, 1994, p. 49-50). Humans are social beings and benefit greatly from social interaction and group collaboration to gain higher awareness into situations, issues and problems. This has been well documented in numerous studies, such as Diamond (1993) discussed the study importance of collaboration and the importance of social interaction in the case of the Aborigines of Tasmania, an island separated by several hundred miles of sea from Australia, that showed that societies that were cut off from the rest of the world tended to regress rather than progress, with the hypothesis that without social interaction and collaboration there can be little progress.

In an academic or intellectual context, at the university level, Robinson (2013) notes: While it is not easy to work with others, the payoffs of good collaborative partnerships are satisfying and productive. Partnerships lead to a synergy of creative thought not possible with solo work and ease the isolation often felt by faculty working autonomously. In addition they also broaden your networks, an effect which brings more opportunities. (Robinson, 2013, p. 157). Jones and Clulow (2012) noted that even if the benefits of collaboration are recognized, it is not always clear how to ensure that productive collaboration occurs. Thus the research question we posed was how to best establish a framework or system to encourage and promote productive collaborations among English as a foreign language researchers. This paper presents a brief overview of the literature regarding practice and theory of academic collaboration, examine the benefits of inter- and intra-institutional collaboration, analyze one case study of collaboration between faculty members at three Japanese universities, and present a list of suggestions for implementation of academic collaboration in the East African context.

2.0. FOCUS OF THE STUDY

Institutions of higher education and universities in the developing world are rated extremely low. Altbach, Reisburb, and Rumbley (2009) state that “African universities have found it extremely challenging and complex to find their footing on the global higher education stage - they barely register on world institutional rankings and league tables and produce a tiny percentage of the world’s research output”. This results in a growing center-periphery dynamic where of the top 800 universities listed on the Times Higher Education Supplement World University rankings, only 17 are located in Africa, none are in the top 100; and only two, both ranked below 700, are in East Africa (THE, 2015). While there are a variety of reasons for this, the amount and quality of published research is a major reason. The options open to resolve this discrepancy is through expansion of research, and improvement of pedagogy. It is critical for African institutions to further increase their respectability in the world standings if there are to be better and stronger global partnerships. By improving the standings of institutions with their counterparts the

institutions will be better enabled to generate memoranda of understanding (MOUs) with international institutions around the world, but most importantly, with those higher ranking universities that are mostly found in Europe and America. This transfer of knowledge can be at both the faculty and the student levels. This fosters greater collaboration and exchange of ideas allowing both organizations access to resources that would prove to be beneficial for both sides. The restrictions that are in place, though often unwritten, are that universities are not always interested in partnering with those which are ranked too low. This also means that African students would be denied access to programs studies in the so-called developed countries.

3.0 METHODOLOGY

The methodology to investigate the research question is based on qualitative research drawing on the principles of ethnographic study and experiential analysis. As Zainal (2007) notes, "A Case Study research, through reports of past studies, allows the exploration and understanding of complex issues. It can be considered a robust research method particularly when a holistic, in-depth investigation is required" (p. 1). The current analysis will use self-reflection as a point of departure to find the salient elements of a successful collaborative academic enterprise. The next section presents a case study describing the experiences of the authors in establishing a system to promote faculty partnerships within and between their respective universities, partnerships that even after five years are still paying dividends in terms of professional development, career opportunities, and collegial friendships.

4.0. STUDY FINDINGS

The study utilized the K-Cubed (K^3) as a case study which encompass three institutions of higher learning in Japan namely: Kobe Gakuin University, Konan University, and Kwansai Gakuin University, all beginning with the same letter, 'K', renamed as K^3 . The study findings reveals that the collaboration of the three universities resulted to the following aspects: professional development, network development, and institutional development. As discussed in detail below.

Professional development benefits through collaborations

From a professional development perspective, there are various activities that take place to benefit the participants. People attending the meeting share professional development opportunities including upcoming conferences, along with publishing opportunities. This type of sharing allows the participants to get a greater understanding of what is available in the publishing arenas and keep abreast of the latest calls for papers. This widens the perspective of the participants regarding the scholarly enterprise.

On example of professional synergy is that the group often explored and upcoming

conference and presentation information. As a conference that most people are planning to attend approaches members try to obtain a conference program in order to share ideas as to what might be interesting presentations or topics, in order to maximize time on the ground at the conference. During an actual conference, if there are two presentations going on at the same time and there is sufficient interest then several members will attend one presentation and several another and later notes can be compared. There is also the chance to compare notes later in the meeting following a major conference, a sort of 'post-conference recap'. This type of cooperation helps give the participants a fuller conference experience.

Another effective way of contributing to one another is through reviewing and critiquing each other's work. Meetings provided opportunities to practice a presentation for a future conference. Slides can be reviewed amongst the group and suggestions given well before the conference. This not only builds confidence but also allows for further development and solidification of the presentation. In the case of academic writing, peer editing serves a similar function with a colleague being able to catch errors in grammar, spelling, syntax and often logic and clarity that the author cannot see. This provides valuable wash-back to one's own writing and presentation skills through a process of reflection. The resulting improvements in writing and presentation skills leads to a higher acceptance rate and a better CV through more and better publications.

These meetings also inspired research collaborations between researchers with similar interests. To borrow the words of Haim Ofek, the 'fire' of academic ideas and inspiration to write is "difficult to start, but easy to share..." (Ridley, p. 60). Some participants pursued joint writing projects, spreading some of the burden of writing amongst each of the authors according to their expertise. Such an approach allows several different viewpoints as well as different writing styles within one publication. These sources of information are often valuable in that they'll give the writers ideas and sources to search out that they may not have thought of otherwise.

Interpersonal benefits and networking through collaborations

Within this realm of scholarly exchange, there are many interpersonal benefits. The first is a safe space in which to explore and share ideas about research and publication. In particular it supports and encourages inexperienced writers and researchers in their research. By sharing their work with other K³ participants, it lessened the stress and burden of writing in isolation. In addition it works as a motivation for all the authors as they are part of a team of people publishing.

Often within these meetings there are opportunities for networking through the other participating members exchanging social and professional contact. An example of this is to become involved in conference organizing, vetting abstracts, reading and reviewing of journal articles, and other positions that are open throughout the academic world. These opportunities are excellent for those who have little experience in some of those areas that they need more experience in, such as presenting or publishing. It can

also find scholars with useful expertise in fields such as statistics or research methods to assist beginning researchers.

This group was an excellent resource to bring together a number of opportunities and produce some publications or attend a conference as a group of presenters and present on some relevant or interrelated research. Finally, it is an effective way to network with others in the professional area that might be a bit more difficult if they were at other, larger venues.

Institutional benefits of Collaboration

The first benefit of the above PD sessions is that the personnel involved become better, more qualified and more valuable employees through knowledge exchange. However, from an institutional perspective, there are several other benefits as well as for consulting with those outside the institution involved get a better perspective on the university and how it is being run.

Intellectual capital is the term used to define the knowledge that an institution has. Although there are certain types of confidential institutional information and secrets that should not be shared for obvious reasons, there are numerous other areas that inter-institutional collaboration can benefit with the sharing of information ideas. For example, starting a new program, such as an English café or an English-only zone for language practice is a daunting task. However, by learning from the trials and tribulations of those who have started up a similar center up, it can be immensely more easily accomplished as a result of this as that type of assistance. After all, to borrow the words of Haim Ofek, “fire is difficult to start, but easy to share...” (Ridley, p. 60). If institutions or individuals can share their experiences, subsequent developers can learn from their mistakes and successes. By getting together and asking and answering certain questions, it can be very helpful for the group that is interested in setting something up see how difficult it is to set it up and how things are going with that particular program.

This is useful in several ways for both sides and all involved. The benefit to those were trying to set up is to gain from the intellectual property of the initiating institution, or learn from the errors of what was not successful area for the initiating institution that is sharing information. For the institution that is sharing, this process is also very helpful as the act of explaining the process in detail and also sharing some of the difficulties that have occurred leads to reflection on why and how the project was accomplished. In addition, independent, outside observations of problems can often lead to solutions and improvements through the feedback and questions given by institutions that are inquiring and what can suggest ideas for future work and improvements

Through public reflection can be basis of learning through the community of inquiry using the concept of reflection carried out in a group of colleagues who have a commitment to task at hand and the shared experience is one of the most effective ways to come to improvements or new ways of solving issues (Raelin, 2001). There are also benefits in revisiting old ideas from new perspectives provided by group members.

The interactions result in improved work quality and quantity, but more importantly in interpersonal factors (Flaherty, 2015).

CONCLUSION AND RECOMMENDATIONS

Human beings are generally social beings and need to get together to create synergy that allows creativity to flow. One way of fostering this growth is through regular collaborations. These can be inter-institutional, or external. And, they can cover a wide variety of disciplines and be interdisciplinary. The latter can even be between seemingly unrelated fields and diverse personalities. But the benefits, particularly for young researchers, are a sharing and multiplying of intellectual resources and experience. This can lead to increased self-confidence and re-evaluation and validation of the role of home-grown solutions in academia.

There are countries with a large number of tertiary institutions, but those universities are largely unsuitable for international standards. This is a trap that is unsuitable for any country and must be resisted by continued vigilance at the highest levels of government. Support for higher education can come in several ways: direct funding; governmental assistance; tax incentives for think tanks; research parks; and tax incentives for businesses. This means regulation in laws that are both positive laws (encouraging behavior) and negative laws (punishing behavior). Altbach et al. (2009) note most research is produced by large public universities, particularly in the developing world, but there is room for smaller private institutions and universities to pool intellectual resources and produce more research. In the case of Kenya, there are numerous homegrown post-secondary institutes, colleges and universities. Cooperation between such educational institutions at the individual, group, or institutional level could reap rewards in improved research, increased opportunities for funding or study abroad, or implementation of better educational programs.

Russell Cromwell has a parable called 'Acres of Diamonds', which he used to raise money for starting Temple University (Philadelphia). The parable is about a poor farmer in South Africa who sold his family farm to travel the world looking for riches. It turns out that the farm he sold was actually the Kimberly Diamond Field: and the lesson was to always remember to look in your own backyard before heading further afield. There could be excellent resources right within institutions as well as others nearby. So, the government of Kenya should do more to continue the development of its own inter-educational fostering of ideas.

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