

Part III: Sustainability of EU-Asian academic collaboration

6. Key foundations of collaboration¹

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This paper discusses three essential pillars of an academic collaboration, namely: a common ground, good organisation, and sustainability. It expounds on the process of finding a common ground by adopting a win-win mentality right at the outset, being clear about one's current position, identifying commonalities and searching for partners, crafting a joint vision, clarifying task division and agreeing on result ownership, fostering an enabling environment, and finally building communication and relationships. It relies on the importance of being well organised by establishing key management units, ironing out the specifics, and clarifying expectations. And lastly, it emphasises the value of sustainability by promoting capacity building and resource generation, recording and replicating good and best practices, and by exploring future linkages.

6.1. Introduction

Collaboration is a powerful tool. In the face of globalisation, it can spell the difference between success and failure. Since globalisation is closely intertwined with internationalisation it is a growing challenge to higher education institutions. The challenge comes with the fast generation of new knowledge and technologies; with the free and easy mobility of human and non-human resources; as well as with the coming together of individuals, institutions and organisations capitalising on synergies. For higher education institutions, the emerging strategy to meet opportunities and threats by the joining of forces augurs well for survival and competitiveness.

The paper discusses what can be the basic pillars of a good academic collaboration. Collaboration refers to the formal agreement between educational institutions to join forces towards achieving desired ends. This can come in many forms from student to faculty/staff mobility, curriculum, extra-curricular, to research and development projects (Knight, 2003). Whatever form an academic collaboration may take, the concern for success is high. This paper gives some pointers towards ensuring success. It enumerates the essential elements and discusses important considerations under each. The substantial discussion centres on finding a common ground in academic collaborations.

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6.2. Foundations of Collaboration

Three elements are considered to serve as a good foundation for collaboration. These are: 1) the existence of a common ground between the collaborating institutions; 2) the presence of a good organisation; and 3) the assurance of sustainability. The following section develops each of these elements.

Have a Common Ground

All successful collaborations rest on the basic pillar of being based on a common ground or common grounds. A common ground refers to the interests shared, or to the basis agreed upon by all parties for reaching an understanding. In the realm of academic collaboration, this can range from interests shared in academic programmes like joint or double degree programmes, faculty/staff/student mobility, research and scholarly collaborations, extracurricular activities, even external relation activities (Qiang, 2003). Any academic collaboration will be shaky without a common ground. Determining the common ground maybe facilitated by the following actions:

Firstly, adopt a win-win mentality. Win-win means making the choice right at the outset to go for a collaboration that will be mutually beneficial. In fact, built into the concept of a common ground is mutual gain. It opens up positive flows and will make identification of common grounds pleasant.

A win-win mentality will proceed with identifying common grounds where gains are present for all the parties concerned even if the gains may not always necessarily be equal. This is because parties that go into negotiations are also not necessarily equal. For example, sometimes the benefits of a joint degree or student mobility may be greater for the bigger and more resource-endowed partner, at other times it is not. There is no problem with this as long as there is acceptance about these conditions from the start. As long as benefits will accrue to all those involved.

A win-win mentality fosters mutual satisfaction. A collaboration that serves the interests of only one party or is exploitative will not yield a good and solid foundation. The true foundation of collaboration is a “win-win” mentality, one that is fair and equitable. As one European Student Union electronic paper correctly pointed out, the operational terms should be solidarity and reciprocity (<http://www.esib.org/index.php/issues/Mobility/95-student-mobility>).

Needless to say, part of a “win-win” mentality is the condition of mutual respect. When there is respect, there will be no intent to exploit. There will only be the intent to build up and share success. Mutual respect will also mean cultural sensitivity. Cultural differences lead to divergence in thoughts and approaches, but diversity opens wide the door to opportunities. There should be a close awareness of the fact that there are differences in the way of looking at and valuing things between, for instance, Europe and Asia. Knowing and

factoring this cultural difference into any partnership will iron out potential problems. It will open up new possibilities and options for the universities who dare to build into the differences a unique blend of benefit for all involved.

The next step is “know your ground”. After being clear about the norms and values that one will take in a collaborative relationship, what should follow is to have a good understanding of where one currently stands. It is imperative to have a good assessment of one’s current status. This means knowing strengths and weaknesses, the opportunities and threats, and recognising one’s mission and goals.

“Knowing your ground” will guide in the search and assessment of an appropriate academic collaboration. For example, one can match strength for strength, the university’s strength with another’s strength. Numerous cases of bilateral and multilateral partnerships of this nature abound. The Erasmus Mundus programme of the European Commission is a good example of this. Matching strengths between participating institutions is done because of the perception that this will magnify impact. In other cases, one can match weakness for strength. This is done in order to counteract the weakness. Some of the collaborations between universities in the North (industrialised nations) and in the South (developing countries) are of this nature. Some instances of collaboration between Asian universities like that of South Korea and the Philippines are also of this nature. Specifically, this refers to partnerships in the case of English language proficiency for South Korean students. Knowing your ground means having a good understanding of the specific problem areas that are specifically constraining, and thereby focusing strategies in these areas.

A good knowledge of opportunities and threats will identify partnerships that will seize the best offers of the times, and thwart dangers and pitfalls. Universities, especially in the South, should be aware of the opportunities and threats that abound in relation to competition, diversification and globalisation, regional integration and the increasing diversity of student populations. More and more southern universities partner with northern universities to grasp the globalisation opportunity and prevail over competition. The Malaysian experience is a good example where higher education is awash with various modes of transnational programmes such as twinning programmes, credit transfer programmes, external degree programmes, and distance learning programmes in order to capitalise on the opportunities that globalisation brings (Lee, 2001).

A clear appreciation of one’s unique reason for being - the mission and one’s desired goals -, will also steer the search for partnerships. Universities will search for collaborations that will bring closer the realisation of their own mission and goals. A university whose mission and goals relate to internationalisation will take proactive measures in attracting academic collaborations with international and not just local partners.

Identify commonalities and search for partners. To find the common ground is “to know and be known.” When one knows where one stands and what one wants, the deliberate search for academic collaborations will be done in one’s favour. There will be proactivity and initiative in seeking or attracting potential partners. One will explore formal and informal channels to search for partners.

An interesting development that was observed in terms of student mobility is the new flows within Asia (Sugimura, 2008). The growing trend of student exchange among the East Asian countries like Japan, China and South Korea, is a strong evidence of collaboration according to commonalities. The same can be said for the growing movement of students from ASEAN countries to the ASEAN education hubs like Malaysia, Singapore, and Thailand.

“To know and be known” may involve doing the following, among others: 1) ask for referrals; 2) participate in matchmaking events; 3) join networks and associations; and 4) be visible. The experience of the Benguet State University through the VLIR-funded Philippine Institutional University Cooperation programme has a very effective way of undertaking partner search by getting referrals from the coordinating institution, the Katholiek Universiteit Leuven, and from other partners in Belgium. Specifically, referrals are often sought from the partner Flemish professors and from the International Relations Office of the Katholiek Universiteit Leuven. This effectively tapped the extensive link of the Flemish partners, and took advantage of the funding donor-VLIR with other networks. The referrals resulted in common grounds identified with new partners for academic collaborations in research and development. Seeking referrals from oversight bodies, donors and other knowledgeable sources is one good way of finding compatible partners.

Participating in matchmaking events is another good way. The European Commission had sponsored matchmaking opportunities for universities in the North and in the South on a number of occasions. This provides a good chance for initial contacts which can then be followed through as one finds worthwhile. A good matchmaking model is the practice of the VLIR-UOS or the International Development Cooperation arm of the VLIR. They introduced a matchmaking process where the southern universities being considered for institutional university cooperation support are given the chance to present their needs and seek the collaboration of Flemish academics in terms of how they can be of help. The matchmaking is not a one-shot deal but extends over a year to confirm whether a consolidated partnership can be developed.

Joining networks and associations is another very good way of finding common grounds. Some examples of this are the Association of Universities in Asia and the Pacific, the ASEAN University network, the European University Association, and the Asia Europe Foundation. These networks and associations sponsor various meetings and events to provide numerous ways of discovering common grounds. Moreover, there are organisations that, by their very nature, foster specific collaborations like student mobility. An example of this is the UMAP or the University Mobility for Asia and the Pacific. Active participation in this organisation provides outright opportunities for various academic collaborations that are viable between the members. The networks or associations also provide a sort of internal guarantee system for the members.

A more straightforward way of being known is by simply being visible. Visibility through the web, in international meetings and events, and in a number of other ways will bring in walk-in partners that one need not seek out deliberately. Informally initiated contacts can grow into a good partnership.

Work out a joint vision, task division and agree on ownership of results. While both parties have separate visions, in the case of academic collaboration the vision should fuse into one. The vision should be shared. Lacking this, efforts in collaborating can easily go different ways. The vision of collaboration can be towards creating something new that will benefit not only the participating universities but their publics as well.

Forging a joint vision entails extensive discussions and planning, extensive consultation and a participatory process. The identification of all the stakeholders and the involvement of the critical stakeholders are musts in determining the joint vision. Often in any academic collaboration, only the direct beneficiaries do all the planning. Indirect beneficiaries are sometimes ignored. It is essential for the ownership and realisation of a joint vision to involve all the direct and indirect beneficiaries, and to ascertain the extent of influence and involvement of each. It is important to identify champions and allies and to engage them towards achieving the vision. For example, it is necessary that the leaderships of the universities be staunch advocates of the joint vision. This can only be possible by direct involvement in its formulation. In this way, leadership commitment and ownership may be assured.

It should also be noted that developing a joint vision entails the joint identification of measurable indicators. The measures of success should be defined as a whole by all the participating universities, and in reference to the universities being represented. This is important to avoid any misunderstanding on how success will be regarded. Moreover, measurable indicators will give precise signals on whether the vision is being realised or not.

Create an enabling environment. Finding common ground means working to create and enabling environment to facilitate the process. This entails a lot of advocacy. Institutions should lobby for appropriate policies that will make smooth the path for academic collaboration. Standards and guidelines for internal and external quality assurance, recognition of credits, recruitment and selection for student/staff/faculty mobility are just some of the pressing areas that must be addressed. In the case of the Philippines, lobby for policies in the area of credit transfers is still messy.

One complication is the mismatch with international partners both in terms of the total duration of schooling which is two years short, and in terms of the school calendar. The Philippine academic calendar starts in June and not in September. Currently, remedial measures are being proposed and argued by the Philippine agencies concerned to achieve convergence in these areas. It is hoped that some consensus will be reached soon and the barriers to the implementation of joint and double degree programmes with Philippine universities will be removed. It is encouraging that the current Chairman of the Philippine Commission of Higher Education (CHED) specified that positioning the Philippines to become an educational centre in the Asia-Pacific Region for foreign students is already being undertaken (Angeles, 2009).

Advocacy should not only be related to policies. This should also address specific forms of government support. This includes the provision of funds to improve the quality of higher education programmes, for student aid and scholarships, for welfare and social support, for database development, and for crafting innovative approaches that emulate and improve on

programmes like Erasmus, the Lisbon Recognition Convention, and Diploma Supplements, to name some. In the Philippines, the CHED is beginning curricular reforms compatible with the Bologna Process, it is accrediting Engineering and Architecture programmes in compliance with the Washington Accord, and it is increasing the number of bilateral agreements with other countries. These are some of the actions that are being undertaken to prepare Philippine Higher Education for globalisation (Angeles, 2009).

The enabling environment can be made possible also with the involvement of other stakeholders like the private sector. Capturing intra and inter-synergies between public and private organisations is a good approach. This can possibly explore issues like expanding vertical mobility, promoting two-way student mobility, expanding geographical coverage, setting benchmarks etc. The EAHEP workshop on Student Mobility, Joint Degree Programmes and International Collaborations held last February 14 to 16, 2009 in Kuala Lumpur, Malaysia is another laudable example of this synergy.

Lastly, communication and relationship building. In the process of forging an academic collaboration, short cuts should be avoided. It is essential that institutions find their true match in terms of intentions and capabilities. This is especially true when implementing a student mobility or joint or double degree programme. This entails thorough research. It means doing one's homework to find out as much about the potential partner as possible. This means really spending time together.

Communication and relationship building involves time and money. One has to do some homework in finding out all that may be known about a prospective partner. The VLIR practice as earlier mentioned is a good example of exhaustive matchmaking. It is an effective way in testing whether the capabilities can be harmonised and can work together. An enduring collaboration depends, among others, on compatibility. This will entail actual site visits and discussions, as well frequent communications. This means having to spend time together. It may mean willingness to commit resources to the "getting to know you" process. Spending time together will minimise some unknowns and will avoid unpleasant surprises.

Good Organisation

When common ground has been identified and an agreement forged, a good organisation should follow. Organising well involves: 1) establishing the key management units 2) ironing out the specifics and 3) always clarifying expectations.

A structure specifying the key management unit/s tasked with promoting collaboration is important. An office with facilities and human expertise should be established. This locates the mandate for internationalisation in an identifiable and responsible unit, as well as providing the venue for the marshalling of efforts and eliminating duplication and fragmentation within the university. It is imperative that this unit be given the appropriate resources to function well. Physical resources such as an office with working furniture and equipment such as computers with Internet connection, a fax machine, and telephone are basic. In most universities, the International Relations Office serves this purpose.

Once the unit is established, it is time to choose the right staffing. There is merit in selecting focal persons who carry weight or influence in university decision-making. Specifically, there is a definite advantage in selecting focal persons who belong to the university management, or have had experience and close relationships with the top management. This is especially useful in the resolution of problems as they arise, and for lobbying purposes in the case of resources required. The roles and responsibilities of the focal person should be identified for clear accountability. Authority and a level of power and autonomy should accompany the position. Moreover, communication and coordination strategies should be spelled out. The dissemination of information and feedback received should be well conceived and not ad hoc. It is best to have a feedback mechanism from stakeholders to understand what works and what does not. More importantly, internationalisation efforts require as much information dissemination as possible. The university constituents have the right to know what is going on. Communication is an effective strategic tool in enjoining positive and cooperative behaviour from those who will be directly and indirectly involved. The Intranet is now a very convenient tool in facilitating communications. Needless to say, maximum use should be made of this tool.

Once the vision has been created, there should be an agreement on the key result areas. This refers to ironing out the specifics. The key results depend on agreements on the deliverables and the timelines. Having this at the outset will be good, as this will guide the monitoring and evaluation process, as well as the assessment of outcomes and impacts. Ironing out the specifics involves identification at the outset of intended as well as possible unintended results of collaboration. This will provide for remedial action especially when the unintended results occur. It involves anticipating the possible hurdles and bottlenecks during implementation, and being ready with remedies and alternatives when the eventuality arises. Ironing out the specifics includes having a system with a set of policies and procedures for the collaboration. These will serve as the guidelines that will streamline processes as well as resolve problems and issues that may crop up. The experience of the Philippine Institutional University Cooperation programme was a successful one in the use of a tool like the logical framework. This gives a good perspective on deliverables that are expected, anticipates potential problems by clarifying assumptions, and identifies the sources of verification.

It is very important to clarify expectations. It is never efficient to operate on unfounded assumptions. Expectations as discussed earlier may be clarified with explicit key result areas. This is especially important for collaborations that cross borders and cultures. For instance, the culture in Asia is the opposite of the European culture of directness and open confrontation. Awareness of this is the start of understanding approaches that will work. Clarifying expectations is vital in cases where there is a language difference between universities of different countries. Asia is predominantly non-English speaking and where English is found, it is often a second language. Care must be taken in this regard for communications to be effective and efficiency. However, not all expectations are captured in the key result areas. Hence, opportunities to revise expectations should be made in as many avenues as possible. It is better to be redundant and persistent than to suffer failure because of unfulfilled expectations.

Sustainability

Promoting sustainability is critical in any academic collaboration. Sustainability means establishing the necessary building blocks to make sure that the collaboration will not be short-lived. Some suggestions to ensure sustainability are:

First, capability building and resource generation should be intended outputs from the beginning. Creatively growing one's own resources through appropriately mapped out strategies will help achieve sustainability. Factoring resource generation during the implementation stage will give an existing collaboration a better chance of continuing even after the donor funds have run out. This is true, in particular, for collaborative undertakings that have the potential to earn income, or for those that are really promising and can attract other funding sources. Resource generation is all the more possible when human resource capabilities have been upgraded. There will be the ability to deal with the challenges, and to forge new links. There will be ability to generate additional resources from expert services that may be used for the purpose.

In addition, success is a great motivator. One should record good and best practices so that they may be replicated and moreover, built upon. A best practice is a potent source of attracting future donors and partners. Highlighting best practices in conferences, blogs, official websites, and other venues and media can be a magnet to draw like-minded individuals and groups. This will open opportunities for new collaborations that will sustain and perhaps even improve on the good practices. It should be said that learning from one's mistakes would also drive sustainability. Failure and success stories fill the learning curve of collaboration experiences. Remembering what NOT to do again is as valuable as noting the successful "to dos." One should stop doing what does not work so as not to waste more valuable resources.

Finally, build on the links that have already been facilitated. Let the collaboration spawn other projects. Be proactive in seeking to expand collaborative partnerships. There is already mileage gained from past collaborative efforts and this can be used to attract new ones. The role of foreign partners is critical in this regard. They can continue to refer and suggest new partners to their counterparts according to their experience and sphere of influence. Also noteworthy is the VLIR practice of facilitating links between partner institutions in the IUC programme. They provide opportunities for transversal activities, and other modes of joint collaboration such as North-South-South project funding. The VLIR has recently introduced a post-IUC package through the Research Initiatives Programme. This modality facilitates linkage building alongside institutional development. It is very useful and commendable that donors provide mechanisms like this to assist in ushering sustainability.

Conclusion

A common ground, a good organisation, and sustainability are the key foundations of a successful academic collaboration. Not one but all are important considerations. There is no easy formula. There are tried and tested methods that may be emulated. There are new discoveries to make. However, in all these, making an academic collaboration succeed takes a lot of hard work. It involves careful planning, extensive consultations, broad participation,

rigorous communications, and an all-out commitment. It takes a lot of inspiration, will and sheer brawn to mobilise common knowledge into a working formula for success.

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