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International collaboration and research capacity building: learning from the EdQual experience

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Research capacity building and its impact on policy and practice are increasingly highlighted in the literature on international research partnerships. In the field of education and development, it is recognised that, in the past, international research collaborations have tended to be dominated by the agenda of Northern partners. Partly in response, new modalities are developing and, in the UK, funding has recently been channelled through large consortia of research institutions spread across several countries delivering a themed programme of research projects. These are expected to build research capacity in the South and influence policy in the countries in which research is conducted, at the same time as producing quality research of international relevance. This article reflects critically on the experience of one research consortium made up of academic institutions in the UK and sub-Saharan Africa. It analyses participation in setting the research agenda, distribution of leadership and forms of capacity building within the consortium. New roles and tensions are identified and implications are drawn out for future international collaborations, funding bodies and ongoing debate within the literature on international research partnerships.

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Introduction

Partnership in international research collaboration is increasingly the subject of critical debate in the comparative literature, most especially in the arena of education and development (King 1990; Crossley and Watson 2003; Stephens 2009; Chisholm and Steiner-Khamsi 2009; Pryor et al. 2009). International partnership and collaborative initiatives are seen to hold increased potential for research capacity building and improving the impact of research upon policy and practice within diverse contexts (Crossley and Holmes 2001; DFID 2008; Crossley forthcoming). Currently, funding originating from the UK and the European Union for international development research is increasingly being channelled through large consortia of research institutions spread across several countries delivering a themed programme of research projects. Such consortia are often interdisciplinary and, to facilitate the impact of findings on policy and practice, may involve collaboration with organisations involved with advocacy or service delivery. Whilst the move to broader and more complex research collaborations has been anticipated within the literature (Gibbons et al. 1994), reflections on actual examples are only just beginning to be published (Barrett, Rubagiza and Uworwabayeho 2008; Chege 2008; Preston 2008). This paper reflects upon new trajectories and models that are emerging within the international literature

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and on the vision and practice of partnership within one consortium in particular. The Research Programme Consortium (RPC) for Implementing Education Quality in Low-Income Countries (EdQual) was funded by the UK Department for International Development (DFID). EdQual brought together higher education institutions in the UK and sub-Saharan Africa and set out to promote African research leadership.

The next section reviews the existing literature on international research collaboration, with a particular focus on North–South partnerships and education research, highlighting trends and tensions that are emerging, arriving at a set of principles that have been identified for the promotion of good practice within international partnerships. The methods used to collect critical reflections on EdQual's research, capacity building and management processes are then outlined and other sources of information drawn upon are detailed. EdQual's vision for partnership entailed Southern research leadership and was informed by the experience of a number of prior collaborative research partnerships combined with a reading of the related comparative and postcolonial literature. The nature of this prior experience and vision is outlined, before describing how the vision played out in practice with respect to collective decision-making at the programme level; research conceptualisation, design and capacity building at the project and institutional level; and distribution of leadership within the partnership. The two themes of collaboration and capacity building are then discussed with reference to issues identified in the literature. The article concludes by drawing out a number of implications for future research collaborations and for the related international literature.

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International research partnerships and capacity building: key themes in the international literature

There is a substantial literature on the related themes of international collaboration, North–South partnerships and capacity-building as they apply to educational research and international development. This section of the article reflects upon the influence of this literature on the nature of contemporary education and development modalities, and upon the nature and impact of the EdQual initiative itself. Much of this literature has its origins in the work of Northern researchers – many of whom are directly involved in research capacity building initiatives, in the North and the South, or in the processes of international development co-operation. Some of the most revealing studies, however, stem from critiques developed by researchers who are concerned about the challenges raised by the uncritical international transfer of social and educational research priorities, paradigms and modalities – with some of the most critical positions originating from Southern researchers in low-income countries (Louisy 2001).

Within the UK, increased attention to research capacity building and the potential of research partnerships has resulted, in large part, from a period of widespread criticism of social and educational research for not addressing the needs of policy makers, for lacking clarity and cumulative authority, and for not being cost-effective and accessible enough (Tooley with Darby 1999). In recent years, this has seen the promotion of collaborative research networks designed to strengthen overall capacity and critical mass (Menter and Murray 2009), and major investments in educational research capacity building through initiatives such as the national flagship Teaching and Learning Research Programme (TRLP) (Pollard 2008). It is argued that such activities will strengthen the national research infrastructure, along with the depth and

quality of educational research in general. At the same time, efforts are also being directed towards improving linkages between research and the perceived needs of educational policy makers and practitioners (Munn 2008; Leitch 2009). Similar trends can be seen in the United States and in many European contexts, with writers such as Gibbons et al. (1994, 19) suggesting that new modes of knowledge production are emerging that are 'characterised by a constant flow back and forth between the fundamental and the applied, between the theoretical and the practical'. From this perspective, it is argued that the quality of research should be judged not only by the rigours of the academic disciplines, but also by its contribution and impact within society. Improved collaboration between researchers, policy makers, practitioners and other stakeholders involved in education is, therefore, at the heart of such developments – and, since the mid-1990s, the influence of these trends can be seen in the changing discourse and policy trajectories relating to the nature and role of educational research in the work of many national and international development agencies (see Wolfensohn 1995; Buchert and King 1996; NORRAG 1998; DFID 2008).

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Implications for the international development arena

In the international development arena, efforts to strengthen research partnerships between the North and the South have been prioritised, with development agency policies increasingly encouraging collaboration in research bids and projects between universities and other research bodies located in both the North and the South. Inspired by global trends and agendas, collaboration of this nature is seen by its proponents as a vehicle for focussing social and educational research upon the priority needs of low-income countries, while simultaneously strengthening the institutional and national research capacity of the southern partners and reducing their dependency on Northern research organisations and expertise. Contributors to Stephens (2009), for example, document the experience of the British Council in facilitating research capacity building in higher education in low-income countries across fields that include education, conservation, health, peace studies and public policy. Most of these projects, however, involved a two-way partnership between a UK and Southern university and hence were much simpler in structure than the DFID-funded RPCs. Clearly, much can be gained from such research and capacity building partnerships, for as Louisy points out with reference to the small Caribbean state of Saint Lucia:

> It is not easy to avoid the dangers of 'uncritical transfer' if one lacks the national or institutional capacity to undertake the type of research or investigative inquiry necessary to 'customise' the experiences of others, however tried and tested … It has proven very difficult sometimes to persuade development agencies that the contexts and circumstances of sub-Saharan Africa or Latin America, for example, do not necessarily apply to the Caribbean region. (Louisy 2001, 435–436)

Researchers such as Crossley and Holmes (2001), King (2007), and Samoff (2009) have done much to develop greater awareness of this potential within both the academy and the international development community. Their experience in low-income countries and in the field of comparative and international education has, however, also led these and other researchers to caution against the potential dangers embedded in the uncritical international transfer of educational research paradigms and modalities from the North to the South.

Holmes and Crossley (2004, 207), for example, draw upon postcolonial theorising to reveal how 'much academic and policy research still has a strong western and positivistic orientation', and why Caribbean small states are 'stretching the boundaries of research to include more informal, but nevertheless intellectual, activities such as work of the storyteller and the calypsonian' to enable local insights, cultures and values to be built into contemporary conceptions of research capacity. Reinforcing critical work by Hoogvelt (1997), Tuhiwai Smith (1999), and Hayhoe and Pan (2001), they argue that:

> To achieve more realistic policies and to more successfully implement reform projects and programmes, improved bridges must be built between diverse research culture and knowledge traditions. (Holmes and Crossley 2004, 212)

In a related vein, Vulliamy (2004, 261) articulates an important critique of the extent of the influence of 'systematic review methodology and its associated privileging of quantitative research strategies, such as randomised controlled trials' on emergent research cultures in low-income countries. St Clair and Belzer (2007) document the power of this paradigm to influence the very nature of what is legitimated as valid research and as appropriate research partnerships and research capacity building worldwide. Similarly, King (2007) shows how development agency research has shaped international education agendas at the expense of important local knowledge, insights and priorities – and Samoff warns that in a context characterised by such globalising trends:

> Terms such as partnership and ownership become standard jargon that obscures the actual locus of authority and decision-making. Foreign aid becomes another tool, or set of tools, used by powerful forces to manage not only the movement of education resources but, more important, the flow of ideas and the specification of which ideas matter. (Samoff 2009, 155)

This is, therefore, the global political economy for educational and development research within which new possibilities for international research partnerships, collaboration and capacity building are currently being negotiated. This is a complex, and politically charged environment where many tensions exist (Crossley and Watson 2003). These include tensions between the efforts of educational specialists to secure ongoing development funds with legitimised and generalisable evidence-based research findings, and efforts to support localised research capacity building in ways that appropriately acknowledge the influence of cultural and contextual differences. On a broad level, this challenges the impact of the post-colonial politics that are embedded within globally influential modalities for research collaboration.

Learning from the past and looking to the future

Looking more closely at the existing research literature it can be seen that a number of common problems have been encountered where sustained efforts have been made to promote successful North–South social and educational research collaboration. This includes insights drawn from work on South–South collaboration (Chisholm and Steiner-Khamsi 2009) and experience gained from a sequence of collaborative research partnerships in which we have worked with ministries of

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education or higher education institutions in Belize (Crossley and Bennett 1997), Rwanda and Tanzania (Tikly et al. 2003) and Kenya (Crossley et al. 2005) – culminating in the EdQual RPC. Those involved in new partnerships, it is argued, could learn much from this experience – from the successes as well as the problems encountered. Castillo (1997, 2), for example, argues that, far too often, research and development partnerships have been dominated by the Northern partners, to the extent that they have failed to develop mutual learning, shared objectives and joint achievements.

Specific areas where distinctive tensions and problems are visible in the research literature include those faced in: the fair division of roles, where, for example, Northern partners have too often commanded all leadership, planning and management roles; the unequal sharing of rewards, benefits and esteem; developing communication strategies that are able to coordinate timely progress in greatly contrasting research cultures; the development and maintenance of positive interpersonal relations; managing tensions between research capacity building goals and research product deadlines; dealing with differing cultures and conceptions of time in meeting 'international' funding and output targets; and establishing appropriate ethical guidelines and framework fitting for such new research partnership modalities.

Work by the Swiss Commission for Research Partnerships with Developing Countries (KFPE 1998) in creating a set of *Guidelines for Research in Partnership with Developing Countries* is helpful in this respect (see Table 1), and is notable for acknowledging that inequalities are often the source of many implementation problems. There is considerable overlap with 10 principles recently identified by The Africa Unit (2010) of the British Council as drivers of 'successful and sustainable' partnerships between further or higher education institutions. Shared ownership tops The Africa Unit's list, which arguably summarises the KFPE four principles of shared decision-making, information, responsibility and shared profits. However, to what extent can ownership be genuinely shared and other principles of research partnership achieved within the framework of new research funding modalities? We now turn to the experience of EdQual to illuminate this question, looking especially at the distribution and practice of research leadership, collaboration and capacity building.

Table 1. Principles of research partnership.

	KFPE's 11 principles
(1)	Decide on the objectives together
(2)	Build up mutual trust
(3)	Share information; develop networks
(4)	Share responsibility
(5)	Create transparency
(6)	Monitor and evaluate the collaboration
(7)	Disseminate the results
(8)	Apply the results
(9)	Share profits equitably
(10)	Increase research capacity
(11)	Build on the achievements

Source: KFPE (1998,8).

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Reflections on EdQual

Overview of the EdQual RPC

EdQual is one of around 28 RPCs funded by DFID, which together are allocated around 15% of its total funding for research across all sectors [figures for 2007 given in DFID (2007)]. Consortium funding is now an established modality used by a range of public and private sector funders, including the European Union and the William and Flora Hewlett Foundation. Prior to the recent change in government, DFID signalled its commitment to continue this mode of funding, although no specific commitment has been made in respect of education research (DFID 2008).

EdQual's core partners are two higher education institutions in the UK and four in sub-Saharan Africa. In addition, it draws on expertise from two associate partner universities [for more detail on the partnership and its research programme see Tikly, this issue; EdQual (2010)]. Its core purpose is the generation of new knowledge for improvement initiatives and sustainable research capacity to assist policy makers and practitioners to improve the quality of education for disadvantaged learners. EdQual has focused on formal basic education at both the primary and secondary levels, which at the outset of the RPC were prioritised for aid by DFID. Four out of five of its large scale projects have worked closely with teachers by using action research to develop strategies and tools that are implementable at the school and classroom level. As part of its research programme, EdQual funded 10 doctoral research students, each of whom was linked to one of the large scale projects.

The EdQual programme has, from the proposal stage onwards, been guided by a set of key principles, presented in Tikly and Barrett (2007). The last of these concerned being 'self reflexive and self critical concerning our own role as education researchers interested in Africa' (Tikly and Barrett 2007, 7). Towards this end, researchers and administrators working within EdQual have participated in a 'reflections workshop' as part of our annual meetings in September 2008 and September 2009 (Barrett, Rubagiza and Uworwabayeho 2008). The workshops were used to share reflections on and discuss EdQual management and research processes. Prior to the 2009 'reflections workshop', participants anonymously submitted a list of what they saw as the three main challenges and three main successes in relation to their work with EdQual. The current article is a product of the ongoing process of critical self-reflection through engaging with the international literature, reviewing key RPC documents and analysing data generated by the critical reflection exercise. In addition, new data were collected specifically to contribute to this analysis.

The new data took the form of narratives invited from a range of individuals involved with EdQual. These included the Director, researchers based in Africa and the UK, doctoral researchers funded by EdQual and administrators. In some cases individuals fulfilled more than one of these roles. Fourteen individuals responded with written reflections. Some narratives ran into several pages whilst others preferred to provide fairly brief responses to a list of guiding questions. Reflections were invited on:

- the beginnings of EdQual – how you became involved; contribution to writing bid and project proposals; initial vision guiding EdQual;
- the EdQual process – challenges and benefits for individuals and institutions; what you have personally learned; what could have been done differently. Including benefits and challenges of partnership with UK institutions, African

institutions and associate partner institutions (in the global South – Pakistan or Chile);
- EdQual and your institution and country – how institutions have supported EdQual, compatibility of EdQual and institutional capacity development objectives; legacy of EdQual in 5–10 years' time.

The length of informants' involvement with EdQual ranged from 18 months to five years (i.e. from the initial expression of interest onwards). All were advised that their comments would not necessarily be treated as confidential and that data were being handled by EdQual insiders. The coordinator of EdQual activities within each partner institution was presented with a draft of this article so that they could correct any misrepresentation of their institution. This did not deter several participants from being directly critical of aspects of the organisation and management of EdQual. As might be expected, criticisms largely came from those with the longest association with EdQual, who were commenting from the vantage point of detailed knowledge of aspirations, development and implementation. These criticisms were contributed by researchers based both in the UK and in Africa and substantiated with reference to actual events.

The main documents that were reviewed had been generated through the lifetime of EdQual and included the:

- invitation to tender, drawn up by DFID in 2005;
- initial expression of interest, submitted to DFID in February 2005;
- full proposal, submitted to DFID in May 2005 and reviewers' feedback on this;
- inception phase report, annual reports; and
- a discussion document and report generated by the mid-term review in 2007.

Vision and practice of partnership

Large consortia are seen to hold the potential to strengthen research capacity of the partner institutions and even the capacity of research audiences to use findings (DFID 2008; Levesque 2008). 'Partnership' and 'capacity building', however, are contentious terms in the field of development (McGrath 2001), where the legacy of colonial power imbalances is still evident in modern globalised aid structures (Tikly 2004). Where money is earmarked as for 'development', the locus of capacity building is defined as being in the South and capacity building becomes viewed as something that the better resourced West does to the less well-resourced South (Cohen 1993). From the outset, it is common for research funding to be sourced from an agency in the North so that the Northern research partners are closer to the funders. Leadership is usually held by a Northern partner, as is the case for EdQual although it was not a criterion of the funding and a small minority of DFID-funded RPCs, in fields other than education, are led by Southern institutions.

Drawing on previous research experience (Dachi and Garrett 2003; Tikly et al. 2003; Robertson et al. 2007) and related theoretical literature (Crossley 2006), in particular postcolonial perspectives on research and development (Tuhiwai Smith 1999), EdQual was committed to African leadership in research focused on Africa (Tikly and Barrett 2007). African researchers were seen as best-placed to design research of local policy relevance and their leadership role was linked to the capacity building objective of the RPC (University of Bristol 2005):

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> … if research is to have an impact then it is best led by those who have a deeper grounding in local realities in schools and have established networks and contacts with local policy makers and practitioners. (Tikly, written reflection)

The vision for African research leadership was put into practice through appointing a lead researcher for each of the four classroom and school-based research projects from one of the African institutions. The lead researcher led the project from the proposal writing stage onwards. All of these projects were cross-national involving data collection in two African countries, creating opportunities for South–South partnership and UK researchers were available to advise and support in the role of 'UK resource people'. Hence, African leadership of international research projects was established but within the overall framework of Northern leadership of the RPC. African leadership could, therefore, be conceptualised as 'deferred' in the Derridean sense of *différance*, which makes a pun on the French verbs 'to defer' and 'to differ', implying that African leadership was in a perpetual state of becoming, of being not quite complete (Hall 2003).

The implementation of this modality for partnership, unsurprisingly encountered significant challenges. These are now explored with specific reference to initial decision-making regarding EdQual's research focus and distribution of leadership.

Collective decision-making and policy-relevance

Both the KFPE and The Africa Unit principles set an ideal of collective decision-making in determining objectives. Decision-making for funded research, however, always takes place within the parameters of terms of reference set by the funding body. Another way of viewing this is to define the collective, which determines the objectives of the RPC, as the team of lead researchers from each partner institution in the UK and Africa and individuals within DFID. The process by which objectives are determined is the competitive-bid process. The parameters set by DFID were in line with its high level goal of contributing towards achievement of the Millennium Development Goals (MDGs). Hence, the education RPCs were expected to have 'a strong pro-poor and gender equity focus' (DFID 2005, 7). In line with the trends in the international development arena identified in the literature review above, DFID consistently emphasised the importance of research communication, impact and developing capacity to generate and use new knowledge in the 25 countries it was then targeting with aid (DFID 2005).

DFID realised its own declared interest in collaborative decision-making by putting up funds for a workshop to bring together representatives from all partner institutions. Participants at this event came prepared to present on the key knowledge needs in their own countries. Many of these were later reiterated by senior policy makers, representatives of non-governmental organisations and academics at national consultative workshops held early in the inception phase (EdQual 2005). The actual focus of the five large scale projects was a compromise between the national priorities identified at this meeting, the agenda 'suggested' in guidelines accompanying DFID's invitation to tender, and the research expertise available to the partner institutions. So for example, early childcare was identified as an area of national knowledge need for three African partner countries but did not appear in the proposal mainly because it did not fit with DFID's interest in primary and secondary education. Mathematics and science teaching was included in DFID's list of suggested topics for research and the

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RPC team included individuals and departments with expertise in this area, hence it became a theme across two large projects. Teacher quality was identified by DFID and by experts from several African countries as a key area for research and this in part prompted the decision to conduct teacher research even though there was limited expertise on action research methods amongst the core partners.

Research conceptualisation, design and capacity building

The locus of control over research design at different stages was to some extent determined by geographies and their connection through communication channels. Bristol was the centre of activity at the bid-preparation stage. As discussed above, the bid-preparation workshop was held in Bristol. The time-bound nature of bid-writing, the fact that some institutions and individuals had better telephone and email connectivity or fewer competing demands on their time meant that influence on the bid was distributed unevenly across the RPC. One African institution found that some key decisions relating to project leadership and design were influenced by individuals based at Bristol. It is hard to trace how decisions on substantive areas for research were made but it was at the bid-writing stage that compromises were made between identified national knowledge needs, the indication DFID gave in its Invitation to Tender of priority areas for the education quality RPC and the expertise available within the consortium.

Once the RPC was underway, African institutions were the centre of proposal-writing activity for four of the five large scale projects (EdQual 2006a). For each project, the lead institution was expected to prepare a detailed project proposal. Research conceptualisation and design was, however, circumscribed by the overall RPC proposal, which had already committed to a substantive area of research and to use of an action research methodology, which had been decided upon in the bid-writing workshop. When these project proposals were submitted to the Director at the end of the inception phase, it became clear that capacity building in proposal writing was needed. This prompted a hastily arranged series of task-oriented proposal-writing workshops that took place within African institutions, and the eventual production of final proposals at the beginning of the second year of the consortium (EdQual 2006a). Hence, Southern leadership, which was very real, was also deferred in respect of research conceptualisation and design as it had to be supplemented by Northern involvement in 'capacity building'. Southern intellectual leadership was also attenuated as research design was circumscribed by a pre-existing framework, collaboratively negotiated through a bid-writing process, which was led from the North. The 'deferred' nature of leadership within the RPC is now explored in relation to the distribution of responsibility and lines of accountability within the consortium.

Distributing leadership in the partnership

A sub-set of the principles for research partnership identified in the KFPE guidelines relate to leadership, how it is practised and how it is distributed. These include sharing responsibility, creating transparency, monitoring and evaluating the collaboration, disseminating results and sharing profits equally. EdQual practised these elements of leadership within certain contractual arrangements determined by the funders, whilst being ideologically committed to an arguably more radical vision of partnership that privileged Southern research leadership. The contractual arrangements for the RPCs

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specified a centralised structure making the Director and the lead institution responsible for co-ordinating, monitoring, liaising between components of the RPC, providing intellectual leadership, engaging users, being the public face of the RPC and reporting to DFID (DFID 2005). Nonetheless, all partners were expected to be involved in all stages of the research, 'starting with research design, and including implementation, outreach and synthesis' (DFID 2005, 6).

EdQual set out to realise its partnership vision through a decentralised management structure, with research conducted in Africa being led by a researcher based in an African institution. The independent team commissioned by DFID to conduct a mid-term review of EdQual commented positively on this strategy:

> A great deal of effort has gone into constructing a programme which is not run purely from Bristol University! All of the four African partners are genuinely involved in all aspects of the research. Indeed, the research is very much their own agenda … . (Allsop, Binns and van der Gaag 2007, 10)

However, the division of roles and responsibilities within institutions, which separated the functions of leading research projects and overall coordination of EdQual activities across projects and budget management, did mean that in two institutions an individual senior academic had considerable management responsibilities but little intellectual leadership. In effect, the split between project management and research leadership had been shifted from the North–South boundary to within a Southern institution. In the other two African institutions one or more individuals shared the roles of coordinator and lead researcher.

This arrangement created different tensions for the two UK institutions in the partnership. At Bristol, the Director found himself formally responsible for research that he was not personally leading:

> Whilst I remain convinced that the devolved management structure we have created, which includes devolution of budgets and responsibility for planning field work and other project activities is both morally and practically the best way to go it has at times led to sleepless nights. … I have had to rely much … on indirect means of ensuring the quality of outputs such as investing heavily in capacity building, putting in place systems of quality control … and regular reporting … Significantly I have had to work hard to develop relationships of trust, with partners. (Tikly, written reflection)

Hence, Southern partners' leadership was 'deferred' in the sense that they were always one step removed from accountability to the funder. Their substantial territory of responsibility was insulated by Bristol, to whom they were contractually accountable. On the other hand, the Director's leadership was also deferred in a similar sense of being 'indirect' and de-centred.

UK researchers were cast as 'UK resource people', implying a supportive role for projects and capacity development. The University of Bath did not lead any individual project, so its researchers had the single role of 'UK resource', a role which was not clearly defined, depended on individuals and changed over the course of a project. Although this created flexibility and allowed project teams to find their own ways of practising collaboration, the lack of clarity made it difficult for some UK researchers to position themselves on the 'reactivity–pro-activity continuum' (UK researcher, written reflection). Despite the formal allocation of leadership to an individual in the South, in some projects and at some times, there seemed to be a persistent perception that leadership, particularly with respect to driving activity plans, should come from

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the UK. This was reinforced by the Director's formal overarching responsibility for reporting to the research funders and also by the necessity of channelling much of the communication between the two African countries collaborating in a project through a UK partner, a consequence of the sub-continent's fragmented communications infrastructure. 'Différance' created blurred boundaries as UK researchers sought a way to defer to Southern leadership and Southern researchers simultaneously deferred to their supposed experience and expertise.

A small number of relatively experienced academics based in the UK, who influenced the design of projects at the conception stage, later withdrew. This was either because they were drawn away by other evolving research interests or because of lack of incentive to invest substantial time in a project perceived ultimately to be under the RPC Director's leadership. This highlights another sense in which the UK resource role was 'deferred' by the complex structure of the RPC, attenuating individuals' sense of ownership and commitment to a project. It should be noted, however, that a greater number of UK researchers remained committed to the projects and to facilitating the professional development of colleagues at earlier stages in their career, within their own as well as African institutions.

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Key themes for international partnership

EdQual's experiences underline and illustrate some of the key themes emerging in the international literature review and these are now discussed with reference to collaboration and capacity building.

Collaboration: dilemmas of space and time

Within the literature reviewed above, South–South collaboration and the establishment of networks that outlive the project or consortium are valued as process goals for international research (Crossley and Bennett 1997; Chisholm and Steiner-Khamsi 2009). EdQual sought to develop South–South research networks through two routes. First, African countries were paired within the four main projects conducted in Africa so that each institution developed a close working partnership with another. Second, the two associate partner institutions contributed specific methodological and substantive expertise. The personal and institutional networks evolved during the course of EdQual were identified by most of the informants as one of the chief benefits of participation in EdQual and one that contributed to personal career opportunities as well as institutional capacity, not just in the arena of research:

> [T]he University of Dar es Salaam views collegiality, collaboration, cooperation and networking as multipliers that enhance the in-capacity of the Schools/Faculties and the value of the Departments' human and social capital through sharing of expertise, experiences, information and practices. By partnering with Ghana we have obviously not only gained in those areas but we have also set up a stage by which the School of Education at the University of Dar Es Salaam and the IEPA [Institute for Educational Planning and Administration, University of Cape Coast] can network and collaborate in various aspects of the academic arena such as external examination, joint research projects and publications. (Dachi, written reflection)

On the other hand, one of the challenges most often raised in the reflective data and also consistently mentioned in annual reports, concerned obstacles to communication

between partner institutions. Competing demands on time were another inhibitor of communications, preventing investment in experimenting with new communication technologies, such as using intranet or online messaging.

Time has been highlighted in the research literature as culturally specific (Crossley and Watson 2003, 80–81). Time, however, was a key issue for both African and UK researchers in the sense of managing competing demands on when 'work in RPC is just a small percentage of annual workload' (challenge, identified anonymously, September 2010). However, this was experienced differentially and more intensively by the African researchers. The implementation of EdQual also coincided with a period of rapid expansion of higher education across many African countries and this meant that some EdQual researchers had heavy teaching loads. With several hundreds of students enrolled on a single programme, weeks of a researcher's time could be spent on the single activity of marking. As teacher trainers, some researchers were also expected to 'go to the field' to observe student placements for three or four weeks at a time. Senior researchers all had significant administrative roles in their universities that, within hierarchical academic cultures, were perceived by their managers to have precedence over all other commitments. Within the Kigali Institute for Education, lead researchers and institutional coordinators also became EdQual-funded doctoral students, so they were juggling multiple roles within EdQual in addition to their other academic roles. Successful collaboration required understanding of each others' working environments across the RPC along with clear lines of responsibility for the implementation of action plans.

Forms and discourses of capacity building

Different forms of capacity building are described within the literature. Cohen, focusing on the public sectors, argues that capacity building efforts should be 'narrow, operational and problem-solving oriented', seeking 'to strengthen targeted human resources … in particular institutions' (Cohen 1993, 26). For others, capacity building is more broadly defined and synonymous with the concept of education itself. Eade, for example, is applying the term to civil society when she defines capacity building as strengthening the ability of women and men to 'overcome the causes of their exclusion and suffering' (Eade 1997, 24). There is a greater emphasis here on promoting democratic participation in decision-making across societies and institutions. Within EdQual's key documents, an understanding of capacity building in relation to specific institutions has co-existed with an understanding of capacity building as integral to educational development more broadly. On the one hand, a key programme objective was that 'African consortium members become regional centres of excellence in one or more areas of education quality' (University of Bristol 2005, 9). Institutional capacity building was understood as strengthening partner institutions' skills base in research methods, administrative support and project leadership and management. At another level, capacity building of educators was seen as integral to raising education quality. Understanding of this latter form of capacity building was informed by the work of Samoff, Sebatane and Dembélé (2003). In their review of reports on enlarging the scale of education reforms in Africa, they highlight the importance of nurturing the local roots of innovation. Action research was viewed as a methodology that unlocked teachers' potential to innovate strategies for improving education and allowed EdQual to analyse the conditions and inputs that nurture innovation.

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Here, we focus on the former more specific understanding of capacity building of research institutions. Three forms of such institutional capacity building were mentioned in the critical reflections data. First, investment in high level research skills for individuals likely to continue to key roles within their institutions took the form of doctoral studentships. Second, the development of specific research skills needed by a project team mainly occurred through task-oriented workshops. Finally, researchers in all countries acknowledged the informal professional development inherent in cross-national collaboration.

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Investing in the formal education of individuals: doctoral studentships

Doctoral studentships were the most formal and intense form of capacity development. EdQual invested heavily in these, funding 10 PhD students, nine of which were awarded to colleagues based in the African partner institutions, the tenth going to an officer in an African ministry of education. Three of these awards were taken up in African universities, one of which also involved visits to a UK university. In addition, a further four doctoral students (one enrolled in an African university) funded from other sources were supported academically. It is possible that spending on capacity building was imbalanced in favour of this type of investment. Focusing capacity development activities on individuals is frequently criticised as a strategy because it does not necessarily strengthen any specific institution. More highly educated individuals also tend to have greater mobility. Furthermore, scholarships to study overseas take key talented people out of the institutions in low-income countries for long periods of time, although we tried to ameliorate this through encouraging PhD researchers to spend about half the study period in their home institution. Studentship awards also redirect funds supposedly 'donated' to low-income countries into the coffers of the universities of the donor country, in EdQual's case amounting to 6% of the total spend. Yet, this form of capacity building was enthusiastically appreciated at both the institutional and individual level, including by individuals who did not themselves receive studentships:

> EdQual PhD students are likely to be the best researchers in the areas of quality education and in the country in general. (Researcher and administrator, University of Dar es Salaam)

This represents the high value placed on advanced skills for autonomous research and intellectual engagement.

Half of the EdQual-sponsored students are already working within their home institutions. The other five expect to return to their home institutions and three of these have also fulfilled lectureship responsibilities during the lifetime of their award. Nonetheless, the absenteeism of lecturers from African partner institutions for months at a time during the lifetime of EdQual stretched academic staffing in the African partners, exacerbating conflicting demands on African based researchers (discussed above).

Strengthening teams: task-oriented workshops and collaboration

The second form of capacity building related to the wider development of specific research skills acquired through working with more experienced researchers and through task-oriented training workshops. Workshop activities ranged from

proposal-writing through action research planning to data analysis. This form of capacity building was directed primarily at allowing the RPC to achieve its research objectives. Nonetheless it was reported as making a significant contribution to institutional research capacity, as a team of colleagues acquired expertise in action research methodology, related methods of data collection and analysis and a substantive area of expertise.

Informal capacity strengthening: research networks

The third and least formal form of capacity building was mentioned by individuals in all EdQual roles, including UK-based researchers and administrators across all institutions. This related to insights gained through collaborating with researchers in other institutions and countries. This included exploring familiar educational issues in unfamiliar contexts, sharing perspectives on educational issues with colleagues living and working in those contexts, observing the ways colleagues go about doing research and sharing intellectual insights and perspectives. Closely related to learning through collaboration was the extension of professional networks, which was seen as expanding capacity through opening opportunities for future research collaboration and intellectual exchange.

Discourses of capacity building

Comments collected from EdQual researchers related to capacity building were overwhelmingly positive. However, a paper on capacity building, commissioned by EdQual during its inception phase, highlighted the hidden contradictions associated with the term 'capacity building' in the context of unequal power relations:

> Problematising the contemporary discourse further, Webster (1997) (writing from a Papua New Guinean perspective) identifies a 'myth of incapacity' in the literature. He goes on to suggest that many international agencies use the concept of capacity strengthening to maintain control by perpetuating a misleading view that low-income countries are unable to analyse and address their own problems. (Crossley 2006, 1)

This demands attention to how 'capacity building' was discursively constructed and deployed. The analysis of partnership has shown how associating capacity strengthening with African leadership has the effect of 'deferring' the leadership, making it less than complete. DFID's terms of reference identified Southern institutions as the main focus of capacity strengthening. Whilst largely conforming with this view, EdQual also sought to establish a counter-discourse through highlighting South–South sharing of expertise and mutual capacity building (University of Bristol 2005; EdQual 2006b). For example, when it came to writing, emerging authors were paired with co-authors with a track record of publishing in international journals within as well as across institutions. Associate partner institutions, located in the global South, although in Africa, were invited to join the RPC because of the specific research expertise they possessed. However, the reflective narratives collected for this article indicate that African institutions were still viewed by EdQual researchers and administrators as the main beneficiaries of more formal institutional capacity building, contrasting with UK-based researchers' tendency to refer only to informal personal learning. The doctoral studentships, for example, were only mentioned as contributing towards the research capacity of African

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institutions and professional learning of their supervisors. No mention was made of financial benefits to the UK institutions and little comment on their contribution to academic communities within the UK, although the latter was highlighted in some supervisors' reports.

Conclusion: new modalities, new tensions

The new research funding modalities are intended to enhance the relevance of development research for policy-making and to strengthen research capacity in the South. The case of EdQual highlights the challenges in realising expectations as new tensions emerge and some old ones persist. The multi-institutional nature of the consortium certainly created opportunities for South–South collaboration and the creation of broad international professional networks. Lead researchers in Africa had a sense of ownership of the research born out of their engagement in the whole process of conceptualising the RPC, setting the research agenda and participating in the decision-making at programme level. Consequently, the research agenda was a compromise between the knowledge needs of national policy in the South and the strategic interests of the Northern agency. Capacity building broke away from the model of a single Northern partner nurturing one or two Southern ones and went beyond training of Southern staff in Northern, or indeed Southern, institutions. Rather capacity building was integral to all process elements of the RPC as skills of research leadership were developed in both the North and South through individuals' participation in conceptualisation, design and management at project and programme level. Inevitably tensions between process and product goals arose, as the delivery of outputs slipped against deadlines set on repeatedly revised activity plans. The nature and quality of outputs also differed from those that might have been produced through more traditional modalities, with prioritisation of process goals, arguably, making research products more relevant to Southern research and policy agendas.

Conversely, the distribution of leadership roles had the effect of diluting Northern researchers' sense of ownership and whilst UK researchers readily deferred to Southern leadership, in some cases this resulted in their own commitment being diluted. Funding agencies and institutional structures also played a part in generating these tensions, with their tendency to reward individual success sitting uneasily alongside research funding modalities that call for more distributed research leadership. Translating innovative research and development policy into successful practice therefore demands concerted and coordinated efforts on multiple levels, and the implications of such changing modalities warrant much greater attention. For example, despite the creation of new leadership roles and extended forms of capacity building in this RPC, the South was still viewed by many parties as the locus for institutional capacity building. Although it was recognised that financial reward and academic recognition accrued to the Northern partners, this was not discursively constructed as 'capacity building'. The implication of Southern incapacity that is historically inherent in the discourse of capacity building persisted into this new form of partnership despite a conscious effort to establish alternative perspectives and understandings. Hence, Southern leadership was deferred in the temporal sense of being formative, still in a state of becoming and not yet complete, raising new challenges for capacity building that are not currently discussed in the literature.

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Larger, more complex research partnerships bring with them more complex management structures and administrative responsibilities. DFID, for example, was especially concerned to ensure robust accountability given the expenditure of large sums of public money. The RPC modality thus required management systems that reflected those established for development programmes, governed through logframes, risk management plans and frequent reporting. This also contributed to the construction of deference, or *différence*, in the leadership role of the Northern partner as research managers in the North became more removed yet formally accountable for research conducted in the South. This tended to intensify old tensions between academics' roles as researchers and teachers. Such tensions were, arguably, experienced most acutely in the Southern institutions, where all academic members of staff have a significant teaching role and the recent rapid expansion of enrolments throughout the higher education sector was stretching many institutions.

Finally, in assessing the impact and potential of the RPC modality it should be acknowledged that the three education RPCs were allocated the majority of UK government funding devoted to education and international development over a five-year period.[1] There is a real danger that this modality may concentrate funding and expertise in a small number of research institutions at the expense of support for research capacity building in a wider range of organisations and contexts. The implications of this for the development of overall capacity to conduct contextually sensitive education and development research in both the North and the South, therefore, warrants careful attention in the future.

In summary, the example of the EdQual RPC demonstrates how the new research funding modalities, currently favoured by agencies based mainly in the North, do create novel opportunities to meet the ideals of shared ownership that lie at the heart of the partnership principles identified both by KFPE (1998) and The Africa Unit of the British Council (2010). They also have the potential to support partnerships that recognise and are responsive to research and policy agendas in the South by strengthening research leadership roles for Southern researchers. However, Southern leadership can still be deferred and, paradoxically, discourses of research capacity building can also continue to be implicit in constructing *différence* or incompleteness. There is, therefore, a need for future research capacity building initiatives to go well beyond elucidating 'principles' of shared ownership. This will require a more critical examination of how international research partnerships, operating within the global political economy through existing and emerging funding modalities, can be organised to do more to empower Southern researchers to lead agenda-setting processes within their own local and national contexts.

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Note

1. The three RPCs were jointly worth £7.5 million and included six UK universities. The other large fund for research on international development, the Economic and Social Research Council (ESRC)–DFID joint scheme, disbursed just over £3 million to education projects between 2005 and 2010. However, all excepting £223,000 of this was awarded to three institutions, which also happened to be partners in the DFID-funded RPCs (ESRC 2010).

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