EdQual

A Research Programme Consortium on Implementing Education Quality in Low Income Countries

INTERNATIONAL PARTNERSHIPS, COLLABORATION AND CAPACITY BUILDING IN EDUCATIONAL RESEARCH: THE EDQUAL EXPERIENCE

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   The Faculty of Education, University of Dar es Salaam, Tanzania
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ABSTRACT

Research capacity building and impact on policy and practice are increasingly highlighted in 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, funding is increasingly being 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, 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 a research consortium made up of academic institutions in 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 debate within the literature on international research partnerships.

Keywords: research collaboration; partnership; capacity building.

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1. INTRODUCTION

Partnership in international research collaboration has long been the subject of critical debate in the comparative literature (Crossley and Holmes 2001), 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 (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 et al. 2008; Chege 2008; Preston 2008). This paper reflects upon new trajectories and models that are emerging within the international literature 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 existing work on international research collaboration, with a particular focus on North-South partnerships and education research, highlighting trends and tensions identified within the literature and 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.

2. 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.

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 (see 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 & 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 (Leitch 2009; Munn 2008). 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 NORAD 1995; Wolfensohn 1995; Buchert and King 1996; NORRAG 1998; World Bank 1998).

3. 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. Stephens (2009), for example, documents 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. Clearly, much can be gained from such research partnerships and capacity building initiatives, for as Louisy points out with reference to the dilemmas faced by 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 & 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 – and 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.

4. 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 & Steiner-Khamsi 2009) and experience gained from a sequence of collaborative research partnerships developed between the University of Bristol and ministries of education or higher education institutions in Belize (Crossley & Bennett 1997), Kenya (Crossley et al. 2005), Rwanda and Tanzania (Tikly et al. 2003) 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. The contributors to Stephens's book (2009), as noted above, also present many concrete examples from which valuable lessons can be learned.

Specific arenas 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 frameworks 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, and is notable for acknowledging that inequalities are often the source of many implementation problems. There is considerable overlap with the ten principles that The Africa Unit (2010) of the British Council recently identified a set of principles that were drivers of "successful and sustainable" partnerships between further or higher education institutions. Table 1 reproduces a list of eleven principles for research partnerships produced by KFPE that, we argue, deserve wider recognition and The Africa Unit's ten principles.

Table 1: Principles of research partnership

KFPE's 11 principles Source: (KFPE 1998, 8)	The Africa Unit's 10 principles Source: (The Africa Unit 2010, 33)
(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	1. Shared ownership 2. Trust and transparency 3. Understanding each partner's cultural environment and working context 4. Clear and agreed division of roles and responsibilities 5. Effective and regular communication 6. Strategic planning and implementation of plan 7. Strong commitment from junior and senior staff and management 8. Supportive and enabling institutional infrastructure 9. Systematic monitoring and evaluation 10. Sustainability

It is through increased awareness and understanding of such experience and related issues that, we suggest, the very real potential of North-South research partnerships and collaboration can be realised – and it is to the experience gained by EdQual in this arena that we now turn.
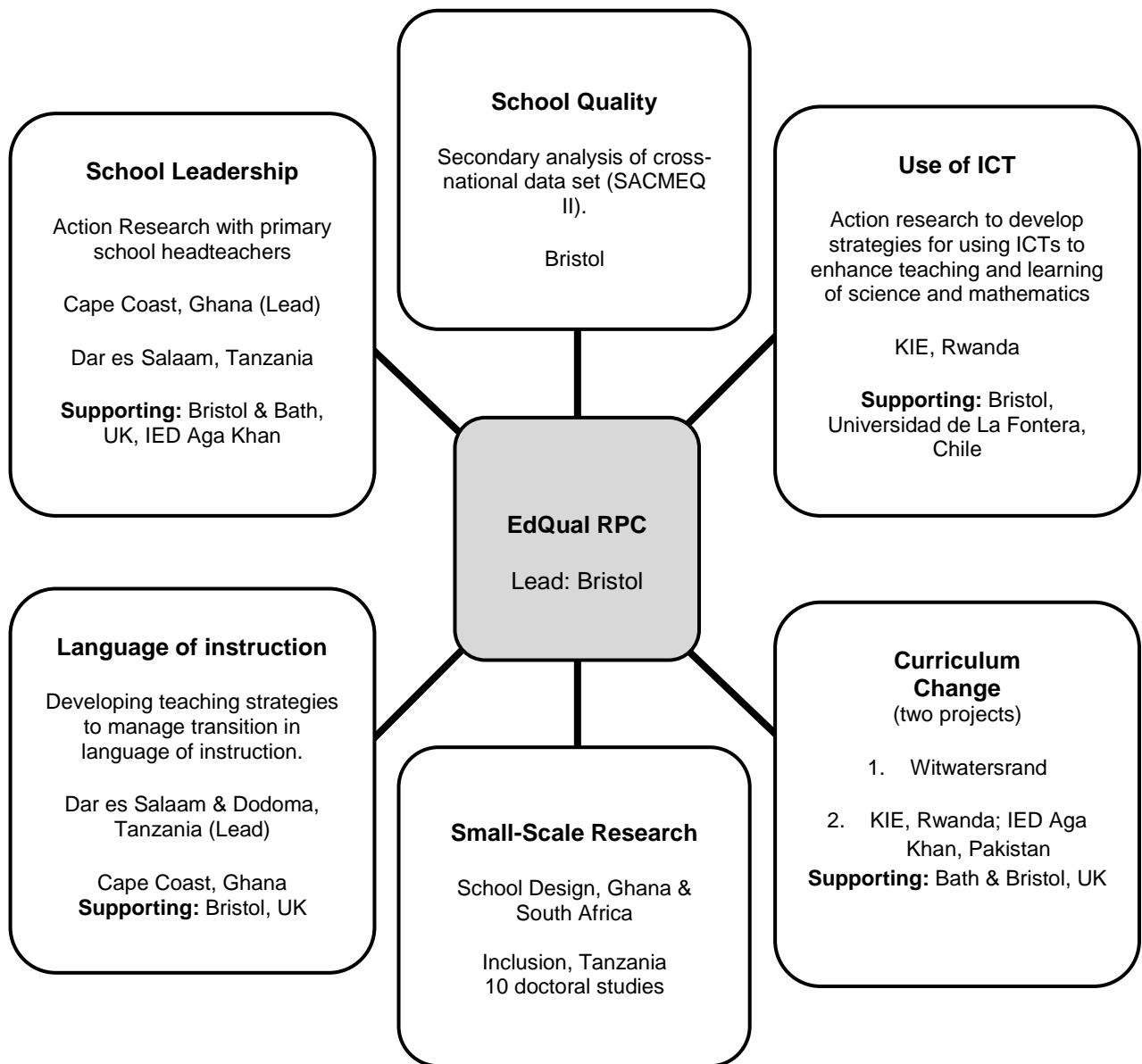

5. REFLECTIONS ON EDQUAL.

5.1. 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 (the universities of Bristol and Bath) and four in sub-Saharan Africa (the universities of Dar es Salaam, Cape Coast and the Witwatersrand in Johannesburg and Kigali Institute of Education). In addition, it draws on expertise from two associate partner universities (Institute of Educational Development, Aga Khan University and Universidad de la Fontera, Chile). Towards the end of the programme, EdQual also had researchers based in the newly established University of Dodoma in Tanzania.

Its core purpose is the generation of new knowledge, initiatives and a 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 time were prioritised for aid by DFID. It has run five large-scale projects in the areas of language of instruction, use of ICTs in teaching and learning; implementation of curriculum change in mathematics and science; primary school leadership and management and school effectiveness and education quality. The first four of these projects work closely with teachers in two African countries, mainly through the use of collaborative action research, in order to identify and develop strategies that work within their local school and classroom contexts and empower education professionals as agents of change. Research on the theme of implementing curriculum change in mathematics classrooms has also been conducted in Pakistan. Each of these projects is led by one of the African partner institutions (see fig. 1). The fifth project has conducted secondary analysis of a large data set on school quality collected by 14 ministries of education across Southern and East Africa (the Southern and East African Consortium for Monitoring Education Quality (SACMEQ) II dataset). In addition, EdQual funded ten doctoral research students and two small scale projects on school design and inclusion of children with special education needs.

Figure 1. Representation of organisation of EdQual

School Quality

Secondary analysis of cross-national data set (SACMEQ II).

Bristol

School Leadership

Action Research with primary school headteachers

Cape Coast, Ghana (Lead)

Dar es Salaam, Tanzania

Supporting: Bristol & Bath, UK, IED Aga Khan

Use of ICT

Action research to develop strategies for using ICTs to enhance teaching and learning of science and mathematics

KIE, Rwanda

Supporting: Bristol, Universidad de La Fontera, Chile

EdQual RPC

Lead: Bristol

Language of instruction

Developing teaching strategies to manage transition in language of instruction.

Dar es Salaam & Dodoma, Tanzania (Lead)

Cape Coast, Ghana
Supporting: Bristol, UK

Small-Scale Research

School Design, Ghana & South Africa

Inclusion, Tanzania
10 doctoral studies

Curriculum Change
(two projects)

1. Witwatersrand

2. KIE, Rwanda; IED Aga Khan, Pakistan
Supporting: Bath & Bristol, UK

The EdQual programme has from the proposal stage onwards been guided by a set of key principles, although these only came to be concisely articulated midway through the funding (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, the first of which generated a published article (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 was collected specifically to contribute to this article.

The new data took the form of reflections, invited from a range of individuals involved with EdQual. People, who contributed their reflections, included the Director, researchers based in Africa and UK, doctoral researchers whose studies were funded by EdQual and administrators. In some cases individuals fulfilled more than one of these roles. Fourteen individuals responded with written reflections. Some responses took a narrative form and 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 contributing to the initial expression of interest in November 2004, almost a year before the RPC started, to around 18 months. All informants were advised that their comments would not necessarily be treated as confidential, as all data was being handled by EdQual insiders and part of the purpose of collection was to fuel a climate of reflection and open discussion within the RPC itself. However, they were all given an opportunity to read a draft of the article prior to its publication so that they may correct any misrepresentation of their views or request the withdrawal of any statements concerning themselves or their institution that they judged as being potentially harmful should it enter the public domain. 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 the aspirations, development and implementation of EdQual. These criticisms were insightful and substantiated with reference to actual events key points for decision-making. They were contributed by researchers based both in the UK and in Africa.

The key documents that were reviewed had been generated through the lifetime of EdQual. They 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.

5.2. Vision and practice of partnership
Several of the KFPE and Africa Unit principles that were identified earlier concern relations between researchers. Central to these is a view that partnerships should be characterised by

mutual trust and transparency (Crossley forthcoming). In developing relations of mutual respect and establishing ways of working together EdQual built upon existing networks that had developed over the preceding decade. The initial core team included two individuals, who had formerly been doctoral students at either Bath or Bristol, and four out of six of the core partner institutions had recently collaborated on at least one previous project (Dachi and Garrett 2003; Tikly et al. 2003; Robertson et al. 2007). The vision for partnership laid down at the beginning was based on years of experience in North-South collaboration, on the part of both the UK and African institutions, and close engagement with the related theoretical literature (Crossley 2006), some of which is reviewed above. In particular, the RPC was explicitly founded on a number of post-colonial perspectives on research and development, as evidenced in the consortium proposal (University of Bristol 2005), inception phase report (EdQual 2006b) and a working paper outlining the research approach (Tikly and Barrett 2007).

The partnership vision first and foremost reflects a commitment to African leadership in research focused on Africa, stemming from an informed moral position on research that values local knowledge and the conscious deconstruction of historically skewed power relations between researchers in the North and South (Tuhiwai Smith 1999). Secondly and pragmatically, African researchers were seen as best-placed to design research of local policy relevance. Lastly, commitment to African leadership was linked to the capacity building objective of the RPC to "develop the capacity of partner institutions in Africa to become regional centres of excellence in research, teaching and policy advocacy in the field of quality education" (University of Bristol 2005, 1). It is worth reproducing the Director's reflections on EdQual's vision for partnership:

> The vision for partnership arose from years of experience within the GSoE [Graduate School of Education, University of Bristol] and other partners of working in international collaborative projects in the field of international and comparative education. At a theoretical level our vision of partnership was informed by a critique of many existing approaches to conducting research in the low income world. Historically, and at the risk of over simplifying greatly, the way that so many 'development' projects have worked in the past is that the Northern partner conceptualises the project and takes the lead in writing up the findings whilst the Southern partner plays a more secondary role in terms of gathering data and organising local workshops and dissemination events. Our own view - that work focusing on Africa needs to be led by African researchers was influenced by theoretical and practical concerns. At a theoretical level our thinking was influenced by postcolonial theory and in particular the moral position that an understanding of education and quality in Africa needed to find ways of privileging the voices of marginalised groups on the continent, voices that were often more marginal in mainstream debates. Our thinking was also based on theoretical work being undertaken by Michael Crossley and others on the importance of context and partnership in undertaking comparative work on education quality. Our theoretical and moral position was informed by a practical consideration that 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. A common starting point in these various influences is an underlying belief in the fundamental importance of realising research process goals including strong and equitable partnerships and capacity building as a basis for achieving other kinds of outcomes. In practice this meant that although Bristol was best placed at the time to lead the consortia – and took the initiative to put together the bid and the research team – the programme could only hope to realise its objectives if the African-based projects were led by the African partners. (Tikly, written reflection)

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 particularly contentious in the field of development where inequalities between partner institutions in industrialised countries in the North and those in countries in the South are embedded. Funding and dissemination of

research is framed by a broader development context within which critics have observed the word 'partnership' to be deployed rhetorically (McGrath 2001) and the legacy of colonial power imbalances is still evident in modern globalised aid structures (Tikly 2004). 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. Implications for the selection of research methodologies and attendant privileging of certain ways of knowing have been explored in the comparative literature (see for example, Crossley and Holmes 2001; Louisy 2001). Leadership is usually held by a Northern partner, as is the case not only for EdQual but the other DFID-funded consortia related to education. 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 North does to the less well-resourced South (Cohen 1993). So, whilst EdQual's vision for African research leadership was in step with prevalent discourses of development, it was counter to normative practices.

The implementation of EdQual's vision for partnership, within the context of a complex research consortium funded entirely by the UK government, unsurprisingly encountered significant challenges. These are now explored with specific reference to initial decision-making regarding EdQual's research focus and distribution of leadership.

5.3 Collective decision-making and policy-relevance

As outlined above, 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 determined by the funding body. Another way of viewing this is to define the collective, which determine the objectives of the RPC, as the team of lead researchers from each partner institution in UK and Africa and individuals within DFID. The process by which objectives are determined is the competitive bid-process. Hence, the anonymous consultants, contracted by DFID to review the bids, may be included as a third party. The parameters set by DFID were in line with the DFID Research Funding Framework 2005-2007 and its own 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 twenty-five countries it was then targeting with aid. This can be seen in the guidelines accompanying their invitation to tender (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 represents the overlap 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.

5.4 Research conceptualisation, design and capacity building

The international literature highlights the importance of recognising Southern ways of knowing. The decentralisation of research design for four of the projects to selected African institutions was intended to ensure that, as well as being relevant to national policy, research was founded on the knowledge and insights of local researchers. For each project, the lead institution was expected to prepare a detailed project proposal, in consultation and drawing on the expertise of other institutions partnered within the project. Research conceptualisation and design was, however, circumscribed by the overall RPC proposal. Within this, an action research methodology was favoured for these projects, involving collaboration between university-based researchers and teachers, both because it was intrinsically "grounded in the realities and perspectives of African-based … practitioners …" and because it supported the development of teacher researchers and academic researchers as "reflective practitioners and agents of change"

(Tikly and Barrett 2007, 7). 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, nevertheless, 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 partners were able and willing to commit more time to developing the proposal than others" (Tikly, written reflection) and that it was easier for some to engage than others because they were physically located within Bristol, had better telephone and email connectivity or fewer competing demands on their time. Consequently, participation in writing the bid was distributed unevenly across the RPC and at least one institution found that some key decisions on the project it was leading were out of their control. African institutions were the centre of proposal-writing activity for four of the five large scale projects (EdQual 2006a). When these project proposals were submitted to the Director at the end of the inception phase, it became clear that experience in proposal writing within the consortium had not been drawn upon sufficiently. 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). The whole process of writing project proposals took longer than expected and was itself a process of capacity strengthening.

It is worth commenting with respect to programme leadership that DFID allows for a consortium to be led by an organisation in a "developing country", or indeed for a consortium to be entirely constituted of "developing country partners". All three of the current education RPCs are led by UK institutions. Certainly, in the case of EdQual, the resources at Bristol, such as expertise in proposal-writing, drawing up a budget and administrative support, that were key to success at the bidding stage, are not available to the same extent in any of EdQual's partner institutions in Africa. In addition, existing international communications infrastructure tends to be more effective between Africa and Europe than within Africa. So, for example, at times researchers in Tanzania and Ghana could not contact each other directly and were obliged to direct their communication through UK–based researchers. This had the effect of shifting the coordinating role to Bristol or Bath. Communication between partners is a persistent challenge for any international partnership but may be especially so for a partnership committed to Southern research leadership.

The kind of leadership apportioned to the Southern partners may be conceptualised as 'deferred' in the Derridean sense of being in a perpetual state of becoming (Hall 2003). African institutions were conceived as moving towards being 'world class' research institutions, capable of designing and proposing research of a suitable standard for UK funding. The need for capacity strengthening implies incompleteness or deficit. On the other hand, Southern partners' leadership was validated by the recognition of their knowledge of local educational issues and the value placed on this knowledge. The 'deferred' nature of Southern leadership is now explored in relation to the distribution of responsibility and lines of accountability within the consortium.

5.5 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 practiced 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, specified a centralised structure making the Director and the lead institution responsible for co-ordinating, monitoring, liaising between components of 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). From the beginning, 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 et al. 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, 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)

At the research project level, 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 according to project phase. Although this created flexibility and allowed projects teams to find their own ways of practicing 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 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.
A small number of relatively experienced academics based in the UK, who influenced the design of projects at the conception stage later withdrew. One major reason for this is that incentives did not align with the demand for achievements typically recognised and rewarded within the UK high education system. In particular, there was little incentive to invest substantial time in a project that was perceived to be ultimately under the principle leadership of a colleague in the same or another UK university. On the other hand, 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.

The Southern partners' leadership can also be viewed as '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. For UK researchers, 'deference' created blurred boundaries as they sought a way to defer to Southern leadership and Southern researchers simultaneously deferred to their supposed experience and expertise.

6. 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.

6.1 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. The discussion of leadership in EdQual referred to the unreliability of communications infrastructure between some African countries. 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). In the data collected for this study, time was also 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 'lost' to the single activity of marking. As teacher trainers, some researchers were also expected to 'go to the field' to observe student placements for three to 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.

6.2 Forms and discourses of capacity building

Different forms of capacity building are described within literature. Cohen, focusing on the public sectors conceptualizes 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. 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.

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.

6.3 Investment in individuals

Doctoral studentships were the most formal and intense form of capacity development. EdQual invested heavily in these, funding ten Ph.D. students, nine of which were awarded to colleagues based in the African partner institutions. In addition, a further three doctoral students funded from other sources were supported academically and included in the community of EdQual students enrolled in UK institutions. 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 where they work and move them to institutions in high income countries, where they study. They may also redirect funds supposedly 'donated' to low income countries into the coffers of universities of the donor country, who charge high fees for overseas students. In the EdQual experience, where doctoral candidates were nominated by the African institutions, more than half of the EdQual sponsored students are already working within the institution that nominated them. All the indications are that the other five will also return to the institutions in which they worked prior to taking up the studentship. However, their withdrawal from their home institution 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 below). With regards to the re-direction of funding, seven out of ten of the studentships were taken up at one of the two UK institutional partners; the fees associated representing nearly 6% of EdQual's total funding. Despite these significant disadvantages, which were at times keenly felt within the African institutions, the funding of PhD studentships was the form of capacity building most enthusiastically appreciated at both the individual and institutional level. This represents the high value placed on the advanced skills for autonomous research and intellectual engagement, which doctoral programmes develop, equipping graduates not just to conduct but also to conceptualise and design research.

> 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, written reflection)

6.4 Strengthening teams: task-oriented workshops

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 not planned with the legacy for the institution in mind but primarily to allow the RPC to achieve its research objectives. The workshops did not stand alone to improve research skills across a team but rather were only effective as part of a process of direct participation in the research. This form of research was specifically mentioned by an academic responsible for coordinating EdQual activities within one of the African partner institutions.

6.5 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 the organic and uncodified learning attendant on collaboration with researchers from 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.

6.6 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 an analysis that goes beyond how capacity was developed across partner institutions to look at 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' or attenuating that leadership. It was also argued that DFID's terms of reference identified Southern institutions as the main focus of capacity strengthening. Whilst largely conforming with this, a counter-discourse is detectable in EdQual documents (University of Bristol 2005; EdQual 2006b) through highlighting South-South sharing of expertise and mutual capacity building, for example through the pairing of less and more experienced researchers, regardless of institution in activities such as co-authoring. The reflective comments point to a differentiation between more formal capacity building located in the South and less formal forms of capacity building that tend to be mutual.

7. NEW ROLES, NEW TENSIONS: CONCLUSIONS, IMPLICATIONS, NEW QUESTIONS.

Over the last six years, including the period of bid-preparation, the EdQual RPC has tried to implement a vision for research partnership that values Southern intellectual leadership and prioritizes capacity building. In part, this vision has been inspired by a literature critical of northern dominance of the international development research agenda in the past. The RPC structure was favoured by its funder, DFID, partly because it was supposed to be more

supportive of Southern leadership than smaller simpler project collaborations of two to three partners. New structures entail new roles and inherent in these are new tensions. In this concluding section, we summarise some of the new tensions highlighted EdQual's experience at the same time as drawing out conclusions, implications and new questions. Firstly, we draw out conclusions for EdQual; secondly, we identify that are relevant for North-South relationships; thirdly, we explore the implications for the funders of international research collaboration; and, finally, we talk back to the literature, outlining further questions for academic debate.

EdQual is now at a point of conclusion, although the work of theorising findings, communicating research and engaging with user groups will continue for some time. Whilst much can be said with hindsight, it is constructive to learn from the collaboration for the future. The work of theorising and communicating findings will continue for some time yet and leaves open the possibility for engagement of a wider constituency of researchers in intellectualising EdQual and its constituent projects. Whilst hitherto researchers from the South and the North have tended to collaborate in theorising research at the project level (e.g. Bosu et al. 2011; Rubagumya et al. 2011; Rubagiza, Were and Sutherland 2011), at the programme level this activity has been dominated by Bristol-based researchers (Barrett and Tikly 2007; Tikly and Barrett 2011; Tikly in this issue). Aikman, Halai and Rubagiza, however, in this issue representing alternative critical voices engaging with the programme level.

Networks have grown up through EdQual linking researchers and administrators across continents. For any resulting future collaboration as well as other unrelated North-South collaborations, the research literature highlights the importance of mutual trust and respect. However, establishing and sustaining trust and respect may demand greater and more organised effort within more complex large consortia than in smaller, simpler project collaborations. Relationships are more dependent on how roles and responsibilities are divided and the clarity with which they are defined. This needs to be underpinned by an explicitly articulated shared vision for partnership to be implemented through research design, the planning and management and capacity building. Inevitably, in an unequal global context implicit to the very concept of international development, implementation will encounter challenges and the partnership will find itself living with tensions that seem irresolvable. This only makes the articulation of a shared vision more important together with reflexivity and space for critical reflection, with points at which roles and responsibilities can be re-negotiated, re-defined and individual and institutional commitments renewed.

Two implications of the discussion in this article can be highlighted for funders of international research. First, the experience of EdQual does demonstrate the benefits of taking risks with funding new research partnership modalities, particularly with respect to creation of less Eurocentric research networks, more opportunities for South-South collaboration, greater Southern participation in setting the research agenda and scope for multiple forms of capacity building. However, a partnership modality is not in itself sufficient to ensure that these goals are achieved and should not be considered a panacea for inequality in research relationships. A second implication, concerns the balance between product and process goals and the related balance between achieving policy impact within the countries in which research is conducted and generating outputs that are useful to donor agencies. Prioritizing process goals such as Southern research leadership, building research capacity or professional development of educators through the research process is likely to lead to research outputs that engage with local knowledge and national policy agendas. This supports a rebalanced view of development, one that values development as process rather than the achievement of pre-specified targets and goals. Within this view, education research does not just generate knowledge that policy makers and others then use to achieve development but rather education research is itself a part of development.

Finally, this article raises new questions for the theoretical literature on North-South collaboration. The existing literature acknowledges the challenge of achieving genuinely equal partnership in North-South collaborations (KFPE 1998), building bridges "between diverse research culture and knowledge traditions" (Crossley 2008) and recognising the discursive work of 'capacity building' that may be positive or negative (King 1991; Webster 1997; Crossley

2006). However, much of this literature is grounded in experience of bilateral or trilateral projects (for example, Pryor et al. 2009; Stephens 2009). Funders are now alert to the risks of counterproductive dominance of Northern agendas within such projects (The Africa Unit 2010) and one response is to re-direct funding into more complex larger consortia. However, critical debate of the consortium partnership mode has hardly begun. In order to understand the consequences of a broad shift to consortium funding, there is a need for literature to engage with multiple perspectives on research consortia, including the perspectives of those working within or associated with a consortium and from researchers without access to consortium funding.

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