

One foot in and one foot out: reflecting on international collaboration

Um pé dentro e um pé fora: refletindo sobre a colaboração científica internacional

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Abstract: International Research Collaboration has been steadily increasing as higher education has become more marketized. Though there are many obvious benefits for collaborating internationally, there are also several challenges that are often not critically discussed. Beyond the issues inherent in unequal partnerships between rich and low-income countries, these kinds of partnerships can be problematic if they do not accentuate collaboration that permits enhanced opportunities to improve and challenge our ideas and share various experiences and knowledges. This paper presents a reflection of lived experiences by three academics who have been involved in International Research Collaboration for over forty years.

Keywords: International Research Collaboration. Academic collaboration.

Resumo: A colaboração científica internacional em pesquisa tem aumentado constantemente à medida em que o ensino superior se torna mais mercantilizado. Embora haja muitos benefícios óbvios na colaboração internacional, há também vários desafios que geralmente não são discutidos de forma crítica. Além das questões inerentes às parcerias desiguais entre países ricos e de baixa renda, esses tipos de parcerias podem ser problemáticos se não acentuarem uma colaboração que permita maiores oportunidades de aprimorar e desafiar nossas ideias e compartilhar experiências e conhecimentos. Este artigo apresenta uma reflexão das experiências vividas por três acadêmicos que estão envolvidos em processos de colaboração científica internacional há mais de quarenta anos.

Palavras-chave: Colaboração científica internacional. Colaboração acadêmica.

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Introduction

Internationalisation of higher education has been promoted by politicians, universities, and academics for a range of reasons, including that of increased marketisation of education, along with academic collaboration to resolve global challenges. The implementation processes of collaboration are often dominated by neoliberal frameworks and a significant Eurocentric skew due to reliance on funding from rich countries. Though formal agreements across geographical, linguistic, and disciplinary cultures are entangled in complex negotiations and differing perspectives, there is not much critical reflection on how international research collaboration (IRC) influences the various stakeholders – researchers, students, communities, as well as the institutions and communities involved in research projects or knowledge exchange.

This paper reflects on the experience of two United Kingdom based academics, both born abroad and a Brazilian PhD student who was undertaking research for his Brazilian PhD in the UK. All three have experience of working and studying within UK academic institutions in England and Scotland, while also having significant experience of at least one other global south international institutional environment which was not their own current home institution. Based on our own work and personal experience of internationalisation, we therefore reflect about and on the experience of international collaboration between countries at the core and the periphery of capitalism countries. We are interdisciplinary in our approach, with our respective disciplines being social work, education, and political economy. So too, we also collaborate in a successful international writing team, which has enabled us to examine explore and utilise transdisciplinary concepts and methodologies. Over the last 2 years we have published in joint publications in two edited books and six publications in high-ranking journals across our partnership.

Why Internationalisation is important in the academy.

International research collaboration has been a significant driver for UK based higher education institutions (HEIs) for the past decade in terms of economic viability through international student recruitment as the government has reduced the size of subsidies, along with global challenges increasingly requiring international partnership and cooperation. Research collaboration (RC) is considered a strategic approach to enhance the competitiveness and economic wealth and prosperity of nations and communities of countries (Comissão Europeia, 2021). With respect to higher education, internationalised institutions are increasingly normalised (for the distinction between globalization and internationalization, see Altbach and Knight (2007)). Tertiary institutions are more conscious than ever of positioning courses of study globally to ensure the competitiveness of their graduates (Lee *et al*, 2013). Metcalfe and Blanco (2021) emphasise collaborative activities, shared interests, along with societal and professional impact are key benefits of this form of international collaboration.

IRC has several definitions depending on context, complex institutional strategies, and wider geopolitical dimensions. Focusing on the transnational nature of the partnership, Metcalfe and Blanco (2021), have noted that prior to Covid-19 this form of collaboration already required long-distance relationships, with few physical in-person meetings. This form of international interdisciplinary approach to collaboration both promotes and has been viewed by some scholars (see for instance Adams (2013), de Grijjs (2015), Specht and Crowston (2022)) as being an innovative approach to problem solving, and capacity building.

It is also important to note how market forces have increasingly become established as part of higher education (Teixeira; Dill, 2011). The marketisation of higher education is aligned with overarching reforms of a strong corporate bent (Brown, 2015). Though this has driven IRC exponentially, Bendixen and Jacobsen (2017) argue that this has nullified quality in academia. Velayutham (2021) contends that though marketisation has expanded access to higher education, it is also eliminating University education's value as discriminant of talent and capability. Marketisation has led to reduced state funding and crevices for income and wealth disparities to establish dominance in the societies, Velayutham (2021) highlights evidence that demonstrates how higher education is now a blunt tool for social mobility.

Critical consideration of the role of internationalisation in sharing ideas, ideology, and neoliberalism

Where exchanges occur between members of developing or existing networks, there is a risk that any of the members could inadvertently develop patterns of working which endanger existing working patterns and so threaten their or the group's ability to capitalise on the potential to work together. This can occur if there is insufficient attention and commitment to the process of joint working and relationships (Engelbrecht *et al*, 2014). Where potential academic partners have taken a more isolationist perspective for a variety of reasons be those economic, language disinterest or expectation that others should lead can result in perspectives which draw distinctions between domestic and international collaborations although it has been argued that these distinctions are often illusionary (Lee, 2011).

Others (see for instance Manathunga (2006), Lee (2011)) argue that international engagement may also take the forms colonial and post-colonial, with the former being the form of engagement when members of established networks view international colleagues as themselves but at an earlier stage of research development. In an international context, the colonialist mode of engagement is common in interactions between colleagues in emerging and established networks. In this paradigm, representatives from established networks view their international colleagues as like themselves, only at an earlier stage of development and so need to be supported to be fully engaged. While this does not imply any lens of domination, often recognises levels of mutual expectations and collaborative roles, but is considered colonial as at best it might imprecisely recognise or ignore cultural context and therefore view the international colleague as other (Manathunga, 2006). This may result in little accommodation being provided to the international colleague, with meetings often being dominated by stylised processes of respect, hospitality and deference between the hosts and visitors, resulting in little transformation (Manathunga, 2006).

The way knowledge exchange is framed is typically influences any impact a project could have. Knowledge ambiguity and specificity can hinder knowledge transfer, whereas knowledge learning and sharing can enhance knowledge transfer (Khanna; Gulati; Nohria, 1988; Simonin, 1997, 1999). More critical engagement occurs within the post-colonial perspective, which enables an exploration along with an engagement of identities and so facilitating exchanges of culture (Manathunga, 2006, p. 21). So too, exploration of ontological and epistemological rationales, along with professional practices are explored and debated, facilitating academic debate and engagement (Manathunga, 2006; Spolander *et al.*, 2016). Research and academic language and teaching across languages increases complexity, requiring ever greater exploration (Spolander *et al.*, 2016). Thus, effective collaboration enables adapta-

ble educational practice, supporting international collaboration to enable flexible and nuanced global educational development practice (Lee *et al.*, 2013).

Academic Culture and its legacies

Barriers to transferring knowledge are viewed by some (see for example Brown, Chan and Lai (2006); Joseph, Laband and Patil (2005)) as lowering a peer reviewed publications impact, which is further exacerbated if authors do not take ownership of the paper. In contrast, highly cited papers often have greater impact than those less cited (see for instance George (2016); George *et al* (2016)), with her levels of citations and readership. Vick (2019) in reviewing the impact of Brazilian higher education institutions international collaboration reports this at a level double that of papers from national collaborations. However, the complexity of author attribution also increases, along with challenges in seeking to understand research productivity and citation impact (LEE *et al*, 2013). So too, the cost of open access publications while high also emphasises the correlation between citation numbers and significance (Mcmannus *et al.*, 2021). For Brazilian HEIs the benefits of international collaboration have included increased visibility of Brazilian research, improved numbers of international collaborations, increased Brazilian academic mobility and encouraging greater numbers of academics and students to Brazilian HEIs.

Reflections on international work through a series of author reflections

The literature therefore highlights the importance of international collaboration to facilitate collaboration, publications and transdisciplinary knowledge exchange and development. In this section we briefly reflect on our aspirations and experiences of international collaboration particularly between the UK and Brazil.

Author reflections on context and personal experience of international collaboration

1. As a child of academics, I was immersed in academic life from birth. I was born during my parents' postgraduate degree fellowships and feel very much like a product of IRC. When my parents were sponsored by national or international agencies to pursue degrees in the global north, the expectation was one of collaborative working. There was a healthy dose of capacity building from the more established universities in high income countries, including funding for developing programmes and institutions. Set against the backdrop of the Cold War, many first-in-family students studied and conducted research in the United States of America/European governments or The Union of Soviet Socialist Republics. Academic pursuits were mixed with sociocultural and political interactions, resulting in rich relationships and extended interactions which expanded IRC networks in the participating countries.

Political funding in the cold war era was simultaneously a recruiting exercise; funders wanted to spread their political and economic ideas and exploit the IRC for maximum political benefit. Some low-income countries took funding from both sides, though the unequal partnerships drew long shadows on the research landscape in many low-income countries. Over the last three decades, the alignment of IRC involves a separate set of political dynamics. IRC is still funded by governments; the aims of these collaboration have also tended to have distinct political and economic undertones. Many countries have conditions on the IRC funding they allocate which inevitable shape the type of IRC and the kinds of people who can participate. When I collaborate with colleagues on IRC projects, I am aware of the power dynamics evi-

dent in the funding criteria and how this may shape reporting and opportunities for future research. In the same vein, industry-led funding has similar economic-framed interests, leading to IRC projects bounded by an underpinning need to meet the stringent deliverables.

The positive impact of IRC is mired in many ways by the human entanglements of exploitation, skewed onto-epistemic partnership and poor funding models.

2. I was the first generation in my family that went to university, with my family being deeply committed to education. I completed my honours degree at the University of Cape Town and immediately after graduation left the country as I did not want to undertake military service during the apartheid period. I was faced with a choice of either leaving the country or serving eight years in prison as a contentious objector. I moved to the UK, but in validating my professional qualification I was surprised that although the UK profession qualification was a 2-year diploma, that overseas qualifications needed to be degree level and of four years duration to be recognised as equivalent. I initially worked for a large Japanese multinational, which involved extensive travel with all the complications of not having a UK passport. I returned to my practice background and then recommenced my studies completing several master's degrees before my doctorate. In moving into academia, I was once again able to undertake work in IRC within a collaborative framework, rather than being in a more competitive commercial environment.

Of interest to me has always been the way in which we can collaborate and develop transdisciplinary understanding of challenges, support student and staff development, and share ideas, understanding and challenge our thinking and understanding as colleagues. My discipline is relatively young, with the majority of those in the profession not engaging directly in international practice or learning, and this creates challenges as to how we build capacity within the profession on an international basis, learn and share learning with colleagues and critically explore contemporary challenges.

3. From my teenage years attending an English course to my late twenties, when I relocated to a different city to pursue a PhD, my family's support played a crucial role in my academic journey. With their encouragement, I completed my undergraduate and master's degrees, despite the demanding dual commitments of working in a bank and in research.

The PhD presented the first opportunity for me to immerse myself in research fully, and it opened the doors to the possibility of studying abroad. Fortunately, I was in a postgraduate program surrounded by senior researchers who consistently provided guidance and encouragement for IRC projects. This support was vital in helping me establish initial contacts and bridge the gaps that would have otherwise been challenging to navigate. Previously, my interactions with international researchers had been limited to Spanish-speaking individuals from Latin America and mostly not in terms of international collaboration. However, in Scotland, I had the privilege of engaging with doctoral researchers from places as diverse as Iran and Iraq, Germany and Ghana, or India and Bulgaria.

While the possibilities for interdisciplinary collaboration were limited due to the varying fields of Pharmacy, Engineering, and Computing among the other researchers, this rich cultural mix offered invaluable learning opportunities as well as significant adaptation challenges.

Individual Aspirations and Dream

1. One of the motivating factors behind my decision to pursue a part of my PhD studies abroad was the opportunity for international collaboration and exposure to diverse research practices. However, being a PhD student entails navigating a somewhat delicate position. In addition to the challenges commonly associated with international collaborations, working alongside more experienced researchers raises further concerns. These concerns include the fear of not being able to make meaningful contributions, feeling underqualified, and potential difficulties in interpersonal relationships.

2. Engaging in international collaboration during the early stages of an academic career can be a pivotal opportunity for a young researcher. Interacting with scholars from various parts of the world, each with their own backgrounds and perspectives, enriches academic life in numerous ways. On the one hand, there are career-related benefits, such as publications, expanding the academic network, and opening new collaborative or professional prospects. On the other hand, broader advantages extend beyond academia, including a widened worldview, increased confidence, and the development of new skills.

For a PhD student, the first experiences of international collaboration serve as invaluable learning opportunities. The pursuit of international collaboration itself is a goal in mind. However, beyond being associated with a research group or publication, there is a genuine desire to actively contribute and have a meaningful role in the ongoing research. The recognition of a junior researcher can be demonstrated in various ways; perhaps the most significant is creating an environment that encourages the expression of doubts and opinions while providing opportunities for junior members to contribute.

3. My dream in terms of international participation is that we have equity in the opportunities for participation. I am aware that for many colleagues and students across the world that access to research, peer reviewed journals and exchange opportunities are limited by access to funding, visa's (particularly to the UK where the current government has been restrictive on access) or generally the opportunities to participate on an equal basis in research and teaching opportunities.

Individualised ideal conditions for IRC

1. Fostering a high level of cooperative teamwork takes time and effort, particularly in international collaborations where cultural and language differences may prove challenging. Developing trust, collegiality, and a sense of fairness and accountability are at the basis of any successful research collaboration, irrespective of the team's geographical distribution (De Grijs, 2015).

As planetary citizens we need to develop our collaborative capacities to think globally about the problems that we face. "Glocal" refers to local thinking with a view of the global (Patel, 2020). One major barrier to positive collaboration is our inability to communicate effectively. We use words in complex and nuanced ways. Glocal communication is central to effective IRC.

2. In several of my IRC relationships, a key challenge has been effective communication. Ideal IRCs need to develop shared language. This expands beyond use of a language of com-

munication, such as English or French, which are widely used to shared understanding of the ontological, epistemological, and axiological dimensions of the words and meaning.

Shared meaning is important, especially as IRC relationships extend across national and cultural boundaries. The meaning of words is steeped in cultural, political, and social dynamics. There is a first to have a comprehensive understanding of the contexts within which the IRC is taken place, including the historical idiosyncrasies and relics of colonial or imperialist influence. Such a process requires trust and a willingness to take risks, communicate with empathy and a healthy dose of patience when understanding and meaning making are slow to develop.

The IRCs have worked in over many years have survived because of the investment in time, trust, empathy, and development. We have partners who take on the role of driving the partnership, encouraging us to communicate, work on joint writing and develop activist-researcher personas. In a sense we all want to make a difference in the real world.

Furthermore, IRC dissemination events and outputs need to be decontextualised for the various audiences we communicate with. More alternative format products are now readily available in the form of poems, art, blogs, community events, etc. It is very important to recognise the language and meaning-making the IRC team would have developed, ensuring that the shared understanding is adequately translated to the academic, civic, business or policy communities as we intend. It would be prejudicial to require those not engage in the partnership will understand what we have developed in the crucible of an extended IRC partnership.

IRC's that use partnership language to communicate with others are often referred to as elitist. This is particularly true where the funding for the IRC is dominated by foreign agencies. The demand and possibly desire to make outputs discernible to the funder negate accessibility by others.

In 2019 I engaged in an IRC workshop funded by the British Council and FAPES in Brazil. I lead the workshop with a colleague in Brazil with whom I had developed a longstanding relationship. The first thing we sought to do was to develop shared understanding of terminologies. We were using complex words like disadvantage, poverty, and social capital. We knew these had differing meanings.

3. My experience of large international projects is that there is a considerable investment in time and commitment to develop IRC's, which take time and are built on relationships and trust in terms of delivering of research or project outcomes. Almost inevitably this requires that collaborators continue their commitments to one another long after they are no longer physically together, even when their employing institutions are both encouraging and making conflicting demands. This also requires that employing organisations bureaucracy are able to provide a facilitative role in supporting this relationship and collaborative development, without demands for artificial performance measures.

Individual reflections on cultural differences, personal and cultural experiences, and funding

1. In my experience IRC are dependent on the networks and good will of an individual. Where good relationships and expansive partnership have flourished someone is responsible

most of the communication. In my work with colleagues in Brazil, Ghana and Finland I have been responsible for majority of the communication. The advantage of joining forces and finding synergies of expertise incorporates the risk of invisibility of single researchers within the larger team. In some cases, younger researchers' contributions may be subsumed.

2. An example of how cultural differences can influence a collaboration is the project initiated with a librarian at a Scottish Institution. Over a month, we had weekly meetings in which he introduced me to techniques and tools not often used or easily accessible in Brazil. One of these was a data extraction method relevant to my thesis. Through our discussions, I conceived a proposal for an article that would greatly benefit from the librarian expertise. Although my immediate thought was to propose a collaboration for this article, I was unsure how to approach the situation. To avoid misunderstandings, firstly, I talked to my colleague who is a professor at the institution, to better understand the co-authorship processes in the UK, how to initiate such a conversation and whether such a proposal would be of interest. Individually, these extra steps may seem insignificant, however, their cumulative impact should not be underestimated.

One aspect that had a major positive influence on the cultural dynamics was the work environment. I was assigned a desk in a shared space occupied only by PhD students. This environment allowed for interactions with individuals from different disciplines and, more significantly, from various countries and cultures, all adapting to the local academic culture. Although not directly related to international collaboration, this exchange helped to mitigate the impact of cultural differences during my time in Scotland.

3. In general terms, the cultural differences between Brazil and the UK may go unnoticed at first glance, as a common Western substratum results in similar norms and everyday practices. However, as interpersonal relationships develop, whether personal or professional, the subtle differences in academic culture become apparent and may hinder international collaboration. Kwiek (2020) identifies how IRC influences include academic discipline, the employing institution and type, along with national reward structure. This is not particularly obvious.

Multiple factors, such as varying tools, programs, and skills, as well as different approaches to organizing and dividing the workload, require continuous adaptation, particularly in the initial stages. Even something as simple as sending an email might pose a minor difficulty, requiring additional time and effort due to the specific formalities one must become accustomed to.

Reflections on Individualised Barriers Experienced

1. IRCs are time-consuming and require extensive administration, coordination, and continuous exchange among teams. A major challenge for teams is intercultural agreement. Too often our partnerships have first to untangle the various meanings of words, layered purposes, and interpersonal goals. In a particular case, I found that assumptions that prevail in the media and some cultures are brought to the fore. Some colleagues were doubting the expertise and motivations of colleagues working in an African country. I felt the colleagues from low-income countries need to demonstrate their ability to complete tasks. The incredible effort put into carrying out their duties is not often appreciated. It is for such reasons that international exchange programmes support deeper appreciation of contexts. This process takes

time. If researchers are allowed to work on building good relationships, colleagues come to value the epistemological and socio-political circumstances their colleagues work in constantly applying a homogenous, deficit lens. Tasks can then be distributed, and responsibilities fulfilled, individually or in constellations which showcase proficiency.

2. Handling communication challenges, especially when researchers work in different locations over long time periods, demands clear communication styles to create understanding, trust, and sensitivity; advanced social planning; and functioning technological support. While establishing regional or domestic collaborations may already be challenging for a variety of mundane reasons, these difficulties might be amplified in an international context. For instance, conflicting research paradigms in different national settings, disagreements on conventions or standards of practice, as well as a lack of compliance with international research protocols may all affect the integrity of the joint research project. In addition, collaborators may not share the same professional jargon, or even speak the same working language sufficiently proficiently (De Grijs, 2015).

3. Geographically dispersed research collaborations, however, impose additional coordination costs for bridging geographic distance and institutional differences. In my work, some good ideas have had to be shelved due to costs that could not be borne by partner institutions. For example, researchers in Finnish institutions have access to public engagement funding, allowing them to explore multi-institute collaborations before they commit to long term projects. Where the cost and time are not invested to build the IRC partnership, less frequent and less effective coordination could lead to more conflict, lack of monitoring and subsequently diverging interests.

IRC fundamentally require intense synchronisation, 'spatially dispersed scientific collaborations' (Cummings; Kiesler 2005, p. 704) demand substantial coordination to effectively bring ideas and expertise together. The key challenges highlighted by Dusdal and Powell (2021) are: 1) Organization and structured management of work packages and tasks, 2) Contrasting cultural and organisational expectations and norms, 3) Career stage differences in researcher needs, 4) Contrasting styles of communication, (exchange of information) and work, 5) Team communications and language skills, 6) Distribution of labour, 7) Time constraints (limited project duration), 8) Diverse theoretical and methodological strengths and weaknesses. It is interesting that our reflections above have captured these features.

The Challenge of Completing this Paper: Conclusion

For the three authors completing this paper has been a challenge to write, but reflecting on the reasons has been complex too. The pressure to write has partly been an ongoing pressure, but we have struggled with what might be useful and meaningful for the reader and how could it have impact. We were three authors, with different perspectives and experiences of international collaboration. We agonised over academic content, what would be sensible and scholarly.

The neoliberal context of the UK has resulted in more functional and managerial approach which is often focussed on the business that this form of collaboration might achieve i.e., funding, international students, and publications. Our institutions often speak and promote international work, but despite these affirmations and aspirations there are problems within

the academy and institutional difficulties which including appropriate funding, pressure to publish in Q1 journals, undertake and submit bids for external funding raising on going questions about how we make an impact and have sufficient outputs for the periodic Research Excellence Framework (REF), the next one being 2028. International non-English publications are not always recognised in institutional analysis of publications and not always ranked. The language may be problematic for high numbers of English citations along with conceptual, epistemological, and ontological challenges. Differences in word length and ideological approaches are just two simple differences we have found.

At times we find ourselves questioning why we put ourselves under pressure for international deadlines when this process is also difficult. Collaboration brings enormous benefits including that of comradeship, personal learning, and challenge, rethinking models and understanding, compromise and needing to engage with transdisciplinary considerations and knowledge development. Our personal commitments, friendship and ongoing curiosity for discovery transcends the institutional frameworks which often shape our working careers, supporting this work as a labour of love, friendship, and commitment.

Working with our Brazilian colleagues has enabled us to reflect and consider again the person in the context of these challenges. Our observations often involve considerations of how much greater their professional discretion is, the depth of their theoretical analysis which supports their passion for their topic, debate, and scholarship.

There are compelling reasons for why international research collaboration is important and critical for the development, sharing and dissemination of knowledge. We are struck that in much of the literature how little is devoted to what elements make this life work, with many long hours often undertaken in our personal time, but this is driven by our commitment to one another and the importance and passion for scholarship. Our work with our Brazilian colleagues is about a journey, for us that started about 10 years ago, with no clear destination and it has brought the three of us to work together with colleagues, widened our networks and encouraged and consolidated our learning as colleagues, academics and as people seeking to understand and support in our small way the problems of the world.

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