International competitiveness and community development with specific reference to research on international collaboration through co-operative academic programmes

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**ABSTRACT**

The tension between internationalisation and community development (regional responsiveness) is illustrated by explaining research on interinstitutional collaboration in co-operative programmes in South Africa. A multimethod approach, in which an extensive literature review was complemented by both quantitative and qualitative methods, was employed. The theoretical analysis was deemed imperative to provide a point of reference for those institutions with a tendency to venture into international collaborations that are not regionally and locally responsive. The article addresses this issue by exploring various notions of the phenomenon; preconditions for engaging in collaborative programmes; and forces compelling collaboration internationally. The subject is brought closer to home by highlighting important milestones in the development of national policy regarding co-operative academic collaboration in the regional context.

In the empirical investigation a brief overview of very important issues related to co-operative academic programmes, as well as challenges around forging collaborations are extrapolated.

**INTRODUCTION**

This article is based on a research project on critical issues related to interinstitutional collaboration through academic co-operative programmes in higher education in South Africa. The article will first highlight both international and national experiences with academic programmes collaboration gleaned from an extensive literature review. The literature review formed a frame of reference for the empirical investigation which aimed at firstly, gathering perspectives from selected groups of respondents with expertise and experience in academic programme planning and, secondly, to reflect on the importance of co-operative academic programmes in partnerships in the future. Thirdly, the research aimed at stimulating and promoting critical thinking and debate as well as building capacity of staff in co-operative academic programmes in partnerships.

A multi-method approach in which an extensive literature review was complemented by both quantitative and qualitative methods was employed. Although there is evidence from the research that there is little progress and some reluctance to collaborate in co-operative programmes, the overall findings indicate that academics in South African higher education understand and support reasons for initiating, as well as securing the benefits of co-operative academic programmes. The entire project culminated in a publication (a book), suggesting the way forward through co-operative programmes.

**INTERNATIONAL PERSPECTIVES ON CO-OPERATIVE ACADEMIC PROGRAMMES**

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An understanding of the driving forces behind co-operative academic programmes in higher education would not contribute much to the success of links in practice without a solid background of what kind of prior preparations must be made before forging co-operative links. Many attempts at inter institutional collaboration abroad have been found to work well in some, but not all, cases. Gibbon and Parekh (2001) concur and argue that the success of co-operative ventures has been evidenced in areas such as technical, infrastructural, as well as library facilities, information and communication technology. According to Strydom (2000:iv), most consortia which have not made it, are those that are either burdened by financial constraints nor expecting the collaborating parties to function on the basis of goodwill and interest.

**Preconditions for worthwhile academic consortia**

It would be pointless to invest energy and resources into academic co-operative ventures which will fail to gain and sustain the initial momentum. The following considerations need to be taken into account prior to collaboration:

- Start collaborations for the benefits they carry rather than wait to respond to statutory demands.
- Involve in multi institutional and not bilateral agreements.
- Be multi functional and not single purpose.
- Solicit long term member support.
- Entrust the management on professional staff.
- Serve the member institutions.
- Support the participants through shared risk and reward, but at the same time strengthen the capacity of each partner in pursuing its institutional mission (Baus & Ramsbottom 1999:4).

According to Baus and Ramsbottom (1999), most consortia abroad have not been easy to form, let alone sustain, and yet institutions have not avoided experimenting with collaboration.

**Challenges confronting co-operative academic links**

Despite the problematic nature of establishing and sustaining consortia as well as co operation in programmes, a rapidly emerging international trend is the movement away from higher education systems that consist of numerous small, specialised, single purpose institutions and the individual offerings of higher education towards systems that comprise a smaller number of large, multi purpose, multi disciplinary institutions that engage in academic programme co operation (Goedegebuure & Meek, cited by Strydom 1999:5). Nonetheless, institutions need to be wary of some of the following challenges in their attempts to collaborate:

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An interesting phenomenon, which all the countries of the world have been experiencing. Some of the core areas which are currently under scrutiny are curriculum and academic programmes which must change to become more responsive to the needs of the various stakeholders in higher education.

International literature on co-operative academic programmes points to the fact that collaboration in academic programmes was motivated by a variety of reasons. According to Professor Rombards, the Pro Vice Chancellor of York, the benefits of co-operative links were then perceived as overwhelming (Times Higher Education 1997:8). The renewed motivation entailed the following:

- Seeing the benefits of co operating in higher education.
- Acknowledging that no single institution is completely self-sufficient.
- Accepting the view that co operation results in economies of scale.
- Believing in co operation and not competition.
- Recognising that co operation is very complex and must be carefully planned.

Following on this, came a period when institutions put their differences aside and stopped being at one another’s throats at the mention of the notion of forming co-operative links. According to Professor Rombards, the Pro Vice Chancellor of York, the benefits of co-operative links were then perceived by different institutions as overwhelming (Times Higher Education 1997:8). The renewed motivation entailed the following:

- Seeing regional institutional co-operation as a way to strengthen the regional economy and the social well-being of the local environment.
- Viewing co-operation as a way to meet labour needs through improving the economic well-being and employment prospects of the region.
- Promoting the view that, although regional, it must also support local development.
- Accepting that a regional consortium must serve its region best by displaying excellence in its national and international activities.
- Seeing co-operation as a way to complement one another’s competencies.

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Well established and large institutions often have a lack of faith in smaller institutions.

Competition among institutions for learners and other resources is rife.

Institutions view one another as competitors rather than allies.

There is usually a significant fear of loss of autonomy and academic freedom.

Diversity exists in the visions and missions of institutions.

A lack of clearly defined goals and objectives of the co-operation is evident.

Barriers in communication and inadequate decision making might occur during planning.

A lack of financial support and incentives is encountered.

There is a lack of initiating bodies.

NATIONAL AND POLICY PERSPECTIVES ON CO-OPERATIVE ACADEMIC PROGRAMMES

The ongoing transformation of the South African higher education continues to place major demands on institutions. One of the most pressing demands is the need to become more responsive by achieving, among others things, diversity, efficiency, effective ness and quality through relevant curriculum offerings, maximum utilisation of human and fiscal resources, as well as improving the throughput of the learners. Some of the compelling motivations for curriculum and programme review include, among others, the escalating rate of unemployment, crime and social problems such as AIDS and HIV.

One way of addressing these issues is the precondi tion put forward by the Ministry of Education (MoE) that higher education institutions should present their programme and qualification mixes to the Department of Education (DoE) for approval. With this require ment, the Ministry hopes to lay a basis for a more rigorous streamlining and rationalisation of pro grammes to ensure institutional diversity as part of the broader institutional restructuring (RSA MoE 2002). Regional collaboration in academic pro grammes is seen as a means to achieving this goal.

The importance of regional collaboration in pro grammes is mirrored in nearly all the policy docu ments of the MoE and, although the lack of relevance in academic programme offerings to the needs of South Africans became a major cause for concern for the new democratic order and policy planners post 1994, it was already cause for debate even during the National Party rule, with the subsequent introduction of reforms which would make universities more selective, productive and cost effective (File, cited by Davies 1994:258). Further policy developments and attempts to render people’s education more idealistic and practical saw the launching of several policies/Acts and commissions in the post apartheid era.

In 1996 the National Commission on Higher Educa tion (NCHE) presented a framework for higher education transformation and identified fundamental principles which it was hoped would guide and direct the process of transformation. Issues such as diversity, equity and redress, quality, effectiveness and efficiency, among others, featured as issues of importance.

In addition to these, 13 broad national goals for higher education in South Africa, which included the conceptualisation of a single, co-ordinated and effective higher education system were presented. Further advocacy was advanced that higher education should offer qualification programmes which are focused on human resource and other forms of development, as well as being responsive to the social, political, economic and cultural needs of South Africa and its people. The commission further envisaged increased co-operation and partnerships, describing new inter and intra institutional partner ships as follows: “Increased co-operation will take the form of inter-institutional programmes and joint ventures as well. It could entail consortia of higher education institutions with different missions or modes of operation working together for specific purposes. It could also mean establishing ‘schools’ for the more effective and efficient use of available resources in professional and vocational training programmes or strategic research projects. Such schools could be transdisciplinary, interfaculty or transinstitutional. Intra institutionally, the co-operative approach could also lead to the reorganising of disciplines into programmes rather than departments” (NCHE 1996:78).

The development of the National Qualifications Framework (NQF) came as an important policy step for curriculum restructuring in higher education. The policy initiative aimed at putting in place a system with a holistic approach towards addressing the individual, social, as well as economic needs of South Africans. In this regard the South African Qualifications Authority (SAQA) has as its responsibility to develop the rules of the NQF as well as to oversee its implementation, in addition to developing and pub lishing policies and criteria for the registration of different bodies.

Continued advocacy for the development of regional consortia and partnerships involving a range of higher education institutions collaborating in the develop ment, delivery and production of academic pro grammes was pursued in the Education White Paper 3: A Programme for the Transformation of Higher Education. According to the White Paper (RSA DoE 1997), the long-term benefits of this venture and others, including collaboration in academic pro
programmes for institutions, are financial savings and gains.

The Higher Education Act (RSA 1997), unlike the other policies, does not provide explicit indications for academic programme co-operation, it proposes co-operation among public higher education institutions to achieve maximum utilisation of resources and improved performance of their functions. Following on the work of the Higher Education Act was the National and Institutional Planning Framework (RSA DoE 1998), which mentions as one of its main policy priorities inter-institutional co-operation as a crucial step to eliminating unnecessary duplication in academic and administrative services. In this document the DoE promised to earmark funds to encourage inter-institutional research projects; to increase the number of academic programmes offered jointly by institutions regionally; and to encourage the sharing of human and fiscal resources available to individual institutions in the region (RSA DoE 1998). The suggestion was that institutions in the regions must make inter-institutional co-operation part and parcel of their institutional planning by identifying what the implications of individual institutional plans for coherence, affordability and sustainability of the regional higher education system are; assessing the implications of institutional academic and programme restructuring for the provision of higher education programmes both regionally and nationally; as well as developing a regional framework for the rationalisation of small, expensive and undersubscribed programmes (RSA DoE 2000).

The emergence of the National Plan for Higher Education (NPHE) (RSA MoE 2001) brought about renewed advocacy for programme collaboration. The Plan criticises the absence of an indication towards voluntary programme collaboration by higher education institutions and spells out the intention of the Ministry to use sanctions and incentives linked to planning and funding to motivate institutions to engage in collaboration. The proposed new funding framework which was released soon after the NPHE became a steering mechanism to meet the goals and targets established in the Plan (RSA MoE 2001). The requirement is that institutions should submit their proposals for new programmes for regional clearance to avoid overlap and duplication.

The National Plan further stipulates that, through regional collaboration, institutions would ensure the effective and efficient distribution of programmes by reducing overlaps and duplications in programme offerings. This, in turn, would result in economies of scale through reducing unit costs and ensuring the continued provision of expensive and under-subscribed programmes which are, however, necessary for the social, cultural, intellectual and economic development needs of the country. In addition, regional collaboration in programmes is bound to ensure diversity by increasing student choice and enabling greater programme responsiveness to the rapidly changing labour market demands (RSA MoE 2001).

The latest policy document, the New Academic Policy (NAP) (RSA DoE 2001), does not make specific reference to co-operative academic programmes, but rather places emphasis on a range of aspects involving programme planning and development. Its emergence serves to fill the policy gap in which higher education institutions have had to operate in the past, by providing an academic planning framework. This framework would also serve as a basis for planning academic co-operative programmes.

It becomes apparent from the above mentioned overview that co-operative ventures are pursued for a vast range of reasons. Seemingly, the South African situation as mirrored by the different policy documents, is not different from the experiences of other countries, in that most if not all of the reasons that prompted inter-institutional collaboration internationally are also applicable here. Yet, currently very little evidence of voluntarism towards forming collaborative ventures in academic programmes is available.

One of the major obstacles to co-operation which could be quoted is the fact that there are no clear guidelines from the MoE as to how institutions can initiate co-operative academic programmes, hence the ensuing research investigation.

**RESULTS OF THE EMPIRICAL INVESTIGATION**

After the literature review the research team did a questionnaire survey and also undertook individual interviews and focus group discussions.

**Important results from the questionnaire survey**

One of the purposes of the questionnaire was to assemble and interpret perspectives from selected groups of respondents with expertise and experience in academic programme planning in the present situation and to reflect on the importance of co-operative academic programmes in partnerships in the future.

Some of the items that were indicated as very important by the participants from universities and technikons are, for instance, lack of incentives (including seed funding to drive the co-operative initiatives). This item was regarded as a very important constraint in co-operative academic programmes. Competition for students was also a very important constraint (more for universities than for technikons). Another very important constraint for
important predictor for the criterion to broaden the economies of scale was identified as the most utilisation of staff to promote cost effectiveness and predictor for the criterion to ensure quality. Efficient for staff interchange seems to be the strongest from this procedure. For instance, more opportunity etc. on each new step. Interesting results occurred the second best predictor, the third best predictor, order to find the most powerful predictor, followed by dent variable. A stepwise procedure was performed in variables (predictors) were identified for each depen and expectations. More or less seven explanatory areas of higher/further education programme plan ning as very important challenges.

Much can be discussed resulting from the above paragraph, but for the purpose here, it is enough to provide a brief overview of the kind of issues related to co operative academic programmes that were regarded as very important by universities and technikons. Another important aspect of this research in co operative academic programmes was the identification of a unique set of criteria for the assessment of co operative academic programmes.

Findings indicate that technikons also regarded these challenges, as well as the rapidly changing catchment areas of higher/further education programme plan ning as very important challenges.

Very important challenges for universities were the following:

- a lack of effective communication and co ordination of the implementation of national policies among different stakeholders;
- the growing global market with competition from overseas institutions and international consortia;
- coping with many priorities like lifelong learning, competence based approaches, information technology, etc.
- linking crucial transformation issues with regard to shape and size, equity, efficiency and interinstitutional co operation to the realities of financial pressure and lack of expertise and using existing resources better through well planned integration and, if necessary, rationalisation.

The above mentioned examples of criteria with their most important predictors (subcriteria), as well as other identified criteria (which are not mentioned here due to a lack of space and time) were further elaborated during the interviews and the focus group discussions. The questionnaire survey also provided other important trends which were followed up by means of interviews and group discussions. In discussing the trends, the following challenges were identified as being important for successful collaboration for higher education.

**CHALLENGES OF CO-OPERATIVE ACADEMIC PROGRAMMES IDENTIFIED FROM THE INDIVIDUAL INTERVIEWS AND FOCUS GROUP DISCUSSIONS**

Challenges identified in the questionnaire survey were further elaborated during the individual interviews as well as the focus group discussions. They are the following:

**Higher education policy overload**

At the national level, the main frustration seems to centre around the current restructuring of higher education. The policy overload which higher education institutions are confronted with has kept these institutions so busy that most of their time is spent trying to understand the influx of policy and finding ways to respond appropriately. In such a situation, the policies that are backed up with guidelines or plans of action and specific deadlines for responses, gain priority over the ones without deadlines. As matters stand, co operative academic programmes belong to the latter (non priority) category. Although mention is made of the importance of academic collaboration through co operative programmes in various policy documents, there is no one policy that clearly states details for such collaboration. Institutions presume the MoE is also battling with the concept of co operative academic programmes, since, as one participant observed, “There is no certainty from the DoE on how co operation in academic programmes...
should be defined and implemented”. As a result, some institutions are taking advantage of the policy vacuum.

Lack of incentives

Incentives for co-operative academic programmes are patently inadequate. According to interviewees, there are no “sticks and carrots”. For instance, so far it is not clear what the funding formula from the government for co-operative programmes will be. Institutions that are willing to venture into co-operative agreements battle to sort out ways to determine how all co-operating parties may benefit optimally from the initiative. In some cases (as in the case of the co-operation in health sciences between MEDUNSA and Stellenbosch University, as well as between MEDUNSA and the Technikon Pretoria respectively) partnering institutions worked out a formula that is acceptable to all parties, but such success stories do not recur in many other attempted collaborations.

The revised higher education landscape

The proposed institutional mergers contributed to the negative response to academic co-operation. Resistance against mergers spilled over into academic collaborations. Many people, it appeared, could not differentiate between mergers and interinstitutional collaboration through co-operative programmes. Some thought that collaboration was the government’s way of trying to merge their institutions, while others questioned the rationale behind forming co-operative programmes before the higher education landscaping process had been finalised. (It should be noted here that the interviews were conducted before the Higher Education Task Group’s recommendations were published.)

Competition among higher education institutions

Regionally, the spirit of fierce competition for learners and prolonged animosity among higher education institutions remain a hindrance. Minimal communication among institutions has been the order of the day and that makes the establishment of co-operative programmes a mammoth task.

Differences in institutional types

Differences in institutional types, cultures, visions, missions and strategic focus areas were experienced as obstacles in setting up co-operative academic programmes. In the KwaZulu Natal region, for instance, the University of Durban Westville (UDW) is said to want a unitary system of higher education institutions, whereas the University of Natal prefers a federal system of higher education institution which allows it to keep its own programmes, qualifications, students, etc. These differences in institutional types could take quite some convincing for institutions to make a philosophical shift, thereby delaying the start of the co-operative venture.

The effects of stratification in the higher education system

The traditional stratification of higher education institutions as either Black or White, advantaged or disadvantaged, continues to pose problems for the higher education sector today. The founding missions of higher education institutions varied, among other things, according to type. The type of institution, in turn, leads to a particular culture and therefore a peculiar vision and focus. Institutions still experience this diversity as a problem.

Quality and quality assurance

Concerns about standards featured enormously in debates about the quality of co-operative programmes. The differences in institutional types discussed above played a role in that historically advantaged universities (HAUs) held the standards of education in historically disadvantaged universities (HDUs) in low regard and would prefer to have their own programmes adopted in any joint venture. HDUs, on the other hand, frequently adopted a defensive approach in anticipation of being treated as inferior. They also valued their programmes as adhering to, if not to a greater extent, the definition of quality as fitness for purpose. This tension about whose programme was better often led to antagonistic reactions that debunked progress with co-operative programmes.

Imbalances in institutional capacity

Some institutions would prefer not to be associated with another, either because of a stigma attached to them or owing to misconceptions about the activities of the potential partner. Imbalances in the resource capacity of institutions led to institutions with greater financial, fiscal and human resources to dominate the ones with meagre resources. The question that normally arose from the dominant institutions was: “What’s in it for us as an institution?” This view of academic co-operation obscures the benefits that regional co-operation has to offer the students, their parents, the employers and the needs of the region in general.

The problem of geographical access

Another challenge that was said to be impeding
regional co-operation was the inaccessibility of education centres. In some regions of South Africa, such as Gauteng, institutions are so close to one another that learners can move from one campus to another with ease. In some instances, as in the case of Rhodes University, the University of Transkei and the University of Port Elizabeth in the Eastern Cape, the geographic distances are so large that it is practically impossible to have learners or lecturers travelling between institutions on a regular basis.

Lack of vision

While negative attitudes, xenophobia and domination are attributes which are encountered in some leaders and institutions that discourage academic co-operation, vagueness of or a lack of vision is also an issue that stands in the way of co-operative programmes. For people who were used to doing their own thing (especially if they had achieved some success), it was often difficult to see beyond the co-operation what implications it had for the future in terms of staffing, student numbers, finances, etc.

Collaboration between universities and technikons

One of the most interesting questions with regard to challenges was whether academic co-operation could happen between universities and technikons. For some regions, e.g. KwaZulu Natal, this seems to be less of a problem. Evidence in this regard is the co-operative public health programme which is co-offered by the University of Natal, the University of Durban Westville, the Natal Technikon and ML Sultan. For some universities, the fact that technikons follow a nationally developed curriculum while universities design their own programmes, was perceived as a major drawback. Although not always explicitly stated, the researchers were of the impression that it would be difficult to deal with and to make satisfactory progress with issues of co-operative academic programmes alongside the current binary higher education system. Some interviewees, however, hoped that the revised level and qualification descriptors (as suggested in the new academic policy) would make academic co-operation between universities and technikons a more feasible reality.

CONCLUSION

Looking at the predictors influencing the criteria from the questionnaire survey and the challenges coming from the individual and focus group interviews, the research group felt that the project would be enriched by adding critical perspectives on co-operative programmes in the distance education sector, a case study of one of the most successful co-operative health programme initiatives in South Africa and, finally suggesting a model for programme differentiation bearing global and regional (local) influences in mind. All these are not reflected in this article but will form part of publications to come.

Nevertheless in referring to these afore mentioned contributions it is abundantly clear that the achievement of a new institutional landscape is not an isolated exercise of merging institutions and campuses only, but preferably a process of programme differentiation bearing issues of efficiency, effectiveness, accessibility and equity with quality in mind.

Programme differentiation, as a successful process of meaningful transformation, has been clearly illustrated by the above work and can be seen as critical for the future success of higher education as the sector attempts to serve the needs and interests of the country. In all the national policy documents, and many other reports, the issue of programme differentiation is seen as critical in supporting the institutional restructuring and building of a new higher education system that is “equitable in its distribution of resources and opportunities, academically and financially sustainable and productive so that it can more effectively meet the teaching, skills development and research needs of our country ... [the far reaching changes will contribute to the development of new institutional cultures able to nurture the future generation of black intellectuals and leaders” (RSA MoE 2002:1).

The criteria and guidelines provided in the suggested model may contribute positively to the quantity and quality of teaching learning and graduate outputs in higher education in South Africa, if the energy, knowledge and skills available for curriculum design and development of programmes, are not wasted on opportunism and short-sighted competition, but are spent on informed collaboration, understanding globalization and regional responsiveness issues in the national policy context of South African higher education. Collaboration through co-operative programmes and partnerships has assumed an increasingly important role in the success of excellent higher education institutions. The ability to form successful partnerships across geographical, philosophical, cultural and practical boundaries with a variety of stakeholders corporate, educational entities, unions, community and government agencies is a critical organizational skill for those charged with programme planning and implementation. In an age of increasing complexity, rapidly expanding expectations and limited resources, collaboration in the form of co-operative programmes offers a practical and viable opportunity for improving and extending the capacity of any higher education institution to cope with a changing environment.
However, this work also expects a good deal of effort, founded on a broader vision of an efficient, effective and high quality higher education system in South Africa; strong leadership; a realization of the need for the sharing of resources; an adaptability to new institutional cultures; and other elements needed for success, all of which are explained and illustrated in various ways in the various chapters of a book produced as part of the research.

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