

# International Collaboration: Necessary, But Challenging



Jeroen Huisman

The claim that international collaboration is important is a truism. A myriad of reasons for cooperation is evident if one looks at existing cooperative arrangements. These may be motivated by an economic perspective (an efficient and synergetic use of human and technological resources, think for example, of large telescopes, particle accelerators, labs, but also of large international datasets), by a cultural perspective (learning from each other) or by a political perspective (development and diplomacy).

In the past two decades or so, the theme of international collaboration has witnessed increased attention. First and foremost, higher education institutions themselves have been eagerly exploring partnerships. Globalisation and technological progress have broadened the institutional horizon and hence offer new – and plenty – opportunities. Second, governments – national and supranational – have been increasingly seeking and actually trying to stimulate cross-border institutional cooperation. Especially the fairly recent *European Universities* initiative springs to mind, but we should not underestimate national governments' initiatives to stimulate international collaboration. Comparing these developments with early-day collaboration in higher education, we see a gradual change in efforts of scholars to work together on an individual basis towards more structured arrangements involving the leadership and administration of higher education institutions.

Increased interest in the theme has also sparked scholarly attention to the phenomenon. A quick search in the archives of *Higher Education Policy* leads to numerous papers that address collaboration, competition, partnerships, etc. Actually, the history can be traced back to the first volume of the journal, with former IAU president Justin Thorens' 1988 reflection on problems of culture and international cooperation. The continued attention to the theme is witnessed by the (so far) latest paper on the theme, by Marianne Larsen and Clara Tascón on cooperation between Cuban

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and Canadian higher education institutions. The variety of specific themes addressed in the 33 volumes of the journal is overwhelming. Publications address micro-level motivations of individual researchers and lecturers, meso-level motivations for strategic partnerships, the experiences of staff, students and leadership and the impacts of collaboration. Not surprisingly, the attention to cooperation echoes the long-standing and laudable commitment of the IAU to university collaboration and partnerships across the globe. It does a wonderful job, speaking with one voice while respecting the diversity of its membership.

What most of the studies on collaboration in higher education have in common is that they continue to stress the challenges, barriers and problems in cooperation. We should not dismiss great achievements, but it is interesting to see that even after decades of experience, challenges still appear to dominate. Much of the strains are undeniably connected to the fact that partners differ. In fact, this is the premise for cooperation. Whatever motivates institutions and individual academics, it boils down to the idea that we seek collaboration when we cannot do things on our own or can do things better if we cooperate. This presupposes that partners have different qualities that transpire in different specific rationales for cooperation, different cultures and different structures. Although Joe Jackson – in the song *We Can't Live Together* – did not refer to cooperation in higher education, his lyrics go straight to the heart of the matter:

And we can't live together  
 But we can't stay apart  
 Why can't you be more like me  
 Or me like you  
 And why can't one and one  
 Just add to two

We should, however, not give up. The challenges are definitely there, but they are not insurmountable. We have to realise that success in structural partnerships is not a given and that investments (personal, administrative and financial) are needed to make it all work.

This leads me – in closing – to a couple of personal reflections. My experiences have taught me that international cooperation in research or teaching can be challenging. The hardest bit – in my view – is to make a start with new partners. Courting, getting to know each other are exciting phases of the collaboration process, but go along with anxieties related to the short- and longer-term sustainability of the partners. Once having successfully worked with international partners, it appears to be relatively easy to continue the collaboration, either firmly through a formal contract or more organically when opportunities arise. Risk-avoiding behaviour, however, may also imply that potentially promising new partnerships are not explored or are too easily discarded.

A second reflection pertains to the challenges of synchronising the institutional objectives with personal academic ambitions within a particular higher education institution. As mentioned earlier, more and more higher education institutions are developing plans for strategic international cooperation and are setting priorities in this area. This makes sense from a rationalistic efficiency perspective: why not focus

on a limited set of sustainable partnerships that are successful or are very likely successful in the near future? The challenge here is two-fold. First, it is difficult to unambiguously prove or predict success in international collaboration. Success is dependent on so many different factors, and even if all preconditions seem to be met, effects may not easily be measurable or not even be visible in the short-term. Therefore, what criteria should a higher education institution use to make strategic decisions? Second, despite all the gloss that higher education institutions themselves put on strategic collaboration, ultimately institutions actually do not collaborate. Representatives of the institutions may sign contracts or memoranda, but the actual collaboration relies heavily on the motivation and interests of academics, administrators and students. And these may not correspond seamlessly with those of the institutions. The institution may look to the east, the academic to the west and the student to the south. Anyway, maybe we should not unnecessarily problematise this: as long as different parties are willing to look in different directions, there will be sufficient scope for interesting and beneficial cooperation.

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