# Maximising the Benefits of International Education Collaborations: Managing Interaction Processes

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## Abstract

International collaborations are frequently mentioned in university strategies as a way of promoting internationalisation, often in relation to achieving greater connectivity among staff from different backgrounds. Much less explicit attention is paid to the underlying rationale for facilitating such connectivity, or the challenges academic staff may face in participating in such collaborations. In this article I argue that failure to pay adequate attention to such interaction issues can hinder the added value that international projects can offer and that much greater attention needs to be paid to the collaboration process itself in order to maximise benefits. I analyse the interaction experiences of staff who participated in a set of Sino-British collaborative e-learning projects and report and illustrate the key challenges they faced and the ways in which they responded. I conclude with a number of implications and recommendations for personnel involved in researching, planning and/or participating in international education collaborations.

## Introduction

Internationalisation is a key element of the strategic vision of many universities throughout the world. Aspirations typically focus on the development of 'global graduates', with an emphasis on the internationalisation of the curriculum and on student mobility. However, as various authors (Black 2004; Leask 2007; Stohl 2007; Lunn 2008; de Wit and Beelen forthcoming) argue, academic staff are crucial elements in the success of the process, and fortunately the importance of faculty in internationalisation initiatives is increasingly being recognised (Brookes and Becket 2011: 378). An analysis of the strategies of 50 UK universities'[1] 'vision strategies' reveals that many state explicitly their aim to facilitate various kinds of international connectivity for their academic staff, referring to mechanisms such as the following:

- The recruitment of excellent staff from around the world;
- The promotion of international research collaborations;
- The encouragement of staff mobility, such as via sabbaticals at universities in a different country and via attendance at international conferences;
- The development of joint degree programmes.

However, much less explicit attention is paid to the underlying rationale for facilitating such connectivity among academic staff, with most giving no reason at all. Kim (2009) claims that it is primarily led by economic interests and, in line with this, some universities link it explicitly with their international profiling. For example, the University of Glasgow (2010: Point 4) states the following: "Central to the internationalisation process is the imperative to augment the University's international profile and promote its reputation as a centre of excellence in research and education. This relates to positioning and ranking, including perceptions of both of these facets by other leading universities around the world."

A minority of universities give other reasons. For example, the University of Bristol (2010: 2) points out that “global research is not just about more ‘connectivity’” and argues that “it is important that such connectivity is seen as a means to a greater end rather than as a good in its own right”. It identifies three such greater ends:

- The addressing of global problems and questions in new ways;
- The enabling of academic staff to think in new ways – to look out of the rut and see different horizons;
- The enrichment of the university through different intellectual approaches.

A few universities (e.g. Surrey, Loughborough and Edinburgh Napier) go a step further and refer to the need for staff to be interculturally aware or sensitive. For instance, Edinburgh Napier University (2009: 7) maintains that if the university is to benefit from the presence of international students, “academic staff must have an appropriate multicultural awareness”. Yet as Stohl (2007: 239) argues, “The chief challenge for developing and sustaining internationalisation in the context of the challenges and opportunities of the 21$^{st}$ entry is the engagement of the faculty”, and de Wit and Beelen (forthcoming) report that “limited experience and expertise of staff” was a key obstacle in the internationalisation process at the Hogeschool van Amsterdam.

In this article I focus on international collaborative education projects[2] and consider the interaction challenges that academic staff who participate in such projects may face. I argue that although the promotion of connectivity is an important and necessary element of internationalisation, greater consideration needs to be given to the interaction processes that academics need to handle. There have been surprisingly few in-depth case studies of international collaborations in the education field (but see Teagarden et al. 2005; Hanges et al. 2005; Spencer-Oatey 2007), and so there is a dearth of information on the details of people’s experiences. This paper aims to address this gap by analysing the experiences of academics who participated in a set of Sino-British collaborative e-learning projects. I start by reviewing relevant literature on the key challenges of collaborating across cultures.

## Intercultural Collaboration Challenges

Authors in many different fields such as business, psychology, foreign languages and education have drawn attention to the complexities of intercultural interaction (see Spencer-Oatey and Franklin 2009 for an overview). Dunn and Wallace (2008: 249) maintain that in transnational education there are four main challenges:

- Arriving at common goals and expectations and negotiating relationships;
- Achieving effective communications among institutions, educators, staff and students;
- Designing and delivering curriculum and assessment for ‘localised (yet) international’ content and teaching approaches;
- Supporting transnational students.

I briefly explore the first three of these, which apply to this study.

Canney Davison and Ward (1999), who have conducted extensive research into various kinds of international teams, recommend that an important first step when a new team is established is for members to identify, prioritise and agree on their goals and objectives. Yet as Dunn and Wallace (2008) imply, this is often not a straightforward process. Referring to McNicoll et al’s (2005) study, they explain that “Educational and commercial goals may not be fully teased out in initial negotiations, thus leading to ‘conflicting interests and a mismatch of expectations’ between the institutions (Dunn and Wallace 2008: 252). This in turn can lead to relationship problems if not handled carefully.

A key to successful negotiation of goals, as well as to the collaboration as a whole, is effective communication. This entails many different aspects, including both management elements (e.g. agreeing the choice of language(s) and the channels and frequency of communication), as well as all aspects of language use such as active listening, linguistic accommodation, negotiation of terms, and stylistic variation. Achieving mutual understanding can be difficult because only a proportion of meaning can ever be conveyed explicitly. Much has to be left for the participants to work out, and in intercultural interaction this can be particularly problematic because people may focus on different clues when inferring meaning and/or they may arrive at different meanings from the same clues (Spencer-Oatey et al. 2011). Similarly, when people have different preferences for directness/indirectness and/or willingness to disclose opinions, each party can find it difficult both to interpret and to accept (e.g. Dunn and Wallace 2008). Several scholars (e.g. Byram 1997; Ting-Toomey 1999) have tried to identify the competencies needed for effective communication in intercultural contexts, but there is a dearth of authentic examples to illustrate the various challenges.

In international education projects, the design and delivery of the curriculum needs to be central to much of the communication. In fact, in transnational education, it is common for staff from the lead institution to dominate such matters, yet as Leask (2004) argues, there needs to be a 'reconceptualisation or reconstruction' of this power relationship. Team members need to explore their respective beliefs and positions with openness, taking what Wang (2005) calls an 'intercultural dialogue' approach and which she explains as follows:

> [Intercultural dialogue] understands that interactions between individuals from different cultures entail inherited frameworks infused with differing perceptions and values. However, dialogue offers possibilities for building emergent understandings and new frameworks rather than submission to imported wisdom. … The result is a group of educated practitioners with more sophisticated repertoires than agents from both the indigenous and foreign cultures.
>
> Wang 2005: 59, 65

Dealing with these various challenges is difficult and time-consuming, and research indicates that if they are not handled effectively, levels of project achievement will be significantly lower (Distefano and Maznevski 2000). However, there are few studies that explore in detail the processes of coping with these challenges, and the following study aims to help address this gap.

## Methodology

### Data Collection

The data for this study comprise a series of interviews with participants of four different project partnerships, along with documentary data associated with these projects and the broader programme they belonged to. All the projects formed part of an international programme that was initiated and funded by governmental organisations in the UK and China and in which top-ranked British and Chinese universities were selected to take part. These universities were paired into Sino-British 'arranged marriage' type partnerships and tasked with developing e-based teacher training materials. There were four such materials development projects, each with a lifespan of about two years.

As part of the ongoing evaluation of the projects, I (in my role as programme manager) conducted two rounds of confidential in-depth interviews with all of the main team members, with the help of one of the Chinese project members[3]. The first round of interviews took place in the spring of 2004, after the first 6–9 months of collaboration, and the second round took place towards the end of the projects, between the autumn of 2004 and the spring/summer of 2005. The purpose of the interviews was broad, and had the overarching aim of understanding project management issues. The first round focused on the following: members' roles in the project, reasons for becoming involved, goals of the programme, personal goals for involvement, factors affecting the achievement of goals, contact with members of other projects in the programme, and communication methods and strategies. The second round covered a similarly wide range of topics, including an update on members' project roles, their collaboration experiences with respect to pedagogy, e-learning design, and communication, challenges they had faced, benefits they had gained, and their recommendations for managing future projects more effectively.

In all, 31 Chinese and 21 UK team members were interviewed, most on two occasions. Interviews usually lasted between 60 and 90 minutes, although some were a little shorter. The interviews with the British team members were all carried out by the British researcher. The interviews with the Chinese team members were nearly all conducted in Chinese by the Chinese researcher, except a few which were conducted by the British researcher (also in Chinese). Most interviews were carried out individually, although for programme management time constraint reasons, some of the second round interviews were handled in small groups of two or three. All interviews were transcribed and interviewees were given the opportunity to check and amend the transcripts. The Chinese texts were translated into English and double-checked by a second bilingual speaker. Translated versions of the Chinese interview comments are presented here. All interviewees' identities have been anonymised by giving them a code (B = British, C = Chinese, M = male, F = female) and a number.

The Chinese researcher and I both had 'insider' status and found people to be relaxed and open in talking with us. In many respects the interviews were simply more formalised extensions of the discussions we were sharing on an ongoing basis. However, it could also be argued that our insider status was problematic. It might have blinded us to elements that we were taking for granted, or it might have caused people to position themselves in special ways in relation to us, especially since one of the interviewers was the programme manager. Yet mutual positioning between interviewer and interviewee will always take place, and the frankness and variety of the comments made by all parties suggests that they were as open and genuine as any interviewee is likely to be. Nevertheless, due attention was paid to the interactive construction of any mutual positioning when conducting the analyses.

The interview data was supplemented with documentary data as follows:

- all the UK programme manager's extensive formal and informal written records of the management, collaboration and communication issues of the Programme;
- all the UK programme manager's interim and final reports on the Programme that were submitted to the UK stakeholder;
- all the individual project reports.

**Analysis**

The qualitative software package *NVivo* was used to analyse the interview transcripts and a grounded approach was used. In other words, first the transcripts were read numerous times to get a feel for the issues emerging, and an iterative process of coding and re-coding then took place. For reasons of space, only a limited number of issues can be reported here, and I focus on three key challenges that emerged from the data (goals, communication and pedagogy), which I later found to correspond closely to those identified by Dunn and Wallace (2008).

## Collaboration Challenges

### Negotiating Common Goals

The governmental stakeholders specified a number of superordinate goals for the programme as a whole, but at project level the teams needed to negotiate their own joint projects and goals. They had to submit their proposals to the stakeholders for formal approval and each of the four teams achieved this successfully, identifying jointly-agreed aims and objectives, project deliverables and key performance indicators. Nevertheless, goals emerged as a significant problem for project members, with several of them identifying it as one of their major difficulties in collaborating. The Chinese partners in particular complained about unclear and changing goals.

> The plan is not clearly mapped out. The general idea is there, but there is no written description. So the University President may be clear, but the people below are not. [CM01]

> The greatest difficulty was the constantly changing goals. [CM20]

In fact, the joint teams were meant to develop innovative courseware, and at the beginning of the collaboration, when both teams were unfamiliar with e-learning in each other's contexts, it was impossible for them to anticipate, in concrete terms, exactly how their courseware materials would demonstrate this. So adjusting the goals as the projects unfolded was in many ways a natural and necessary phenomenon, as some of the members realised.

> The project was an innovative one. There was a distance between the original plan and the actual implementation. We originally designed things very well but couldn't realise them. Then we had to re-adjust our goals. [CF22]

However, not all the goal adjustments were so justifiable. After a year or so, differences in levels of funding emerged between British and Chinese members, and this added new tensions. The Chinese partners wanted to develop full modules so that they could recoup the money they were investing by offering fee-paying courses; the British teams, in contrast, had received good levels of funding, but many of them wanted (and needed) to gain research data from the collaborations so they could write high quality publications to meet the demands of the UK 2008 Research Assessment Exercise. Their attention was therefore focused on applied research associated with their project, not on the speedy development of full e-learning modules. Yet team members were not always explicit about their differing priorities.

> Misunderstandings and discrepancies still existed in our goals. What we were doing most of the time was seeking common ground while reserving differences. … We should put our goals, no matter if they were the same or different, on the table. In fact, one major problem between us was that we only spoke out our agreements but hid the disagreements in the heart. During the process, we discovered that the disagreements caused much confusion to the other side. [CM07]

In due course, these differences emerged and these mid-term realizations led to some extremely painful strategic moments for some of the project members, entailing either outbursts of anger and complaint, or stony silence and withdrawal. The teams found that they needed to resolve a number of tensions in their goals, as shown in Figure 1.

Figure 1: Tensions in goals that project members needed to resolve

| | | |
|---|---|---|
| Development of course materials as an end in itself | ⟷ | Development of course materials as a means of conducting applied research and of gaining generic insights |
| Development of a full course/module | ⟷ | Development of innovative samples |
| Design which suits Chinese learners' current study preferences | ⟷ | Design which helps implement China's educational reform by giving more emphasis to student-centred learning and self-study |
| Expert-based Design Approach | ⟷ | Learner/Practitioner-based Design Approach |
| Acceptance of existing platform functionality | ⟷ | Development of new platform functionality |

**Managing Language and Communication**

All of the British projects initially relied almost exclusively on the Chinese partners' abilities to speak English. None of them had any Chinese-speaking members at the start of their project, and so the burden of interpreting and translation fell almost entirely on the Chinese partners. For one of the projects in particular, which was developing materials for non-English-specialist middle school teachers, this was a heavy burden. Language affected not only team interaction but also course development and mutual exchange and evaluation of each other's materials (everything had to be translated from English to Chinese and from Chinese to English, so that the Chinese and British academic developers could give feedback on each other's work). This significantly increased the workload of the Chinese partners and was problematic in a number of ways. Some members felt quite strongly about this issue:

> The working language was English. Due to the language problems, when we couldn't express ourselves clearly, it seemed as though we Chinese were at a disadvantage. But as a matter of fact, the British were thinking hard to get what we wanted to say. [CM21]

> I think we should show consideration for each other in terms of language. China is now developing very fast; they should know some Chinese to communicate with us. … We have learned a lot of English, it's their turn to learn some basic Chinese, as it is two-way communication. I find it weird that they don't know even a word of Chinese. [CF16]

As the projects progressed, most of the British realized the importance of having a Chinese speaker to work with them in Britain, and so identified suitable people to bring in on an ad hoc basis. In addition, several of them started to take Chinese language lessons.

All of the project members found that it was vital to spend considerable time reaching a common understanding of 'technical' terms and concepts. This was not a language proficiency issue; it was equally important among native speakers. The process seemed never-ending: uncovering the nuances of meaning associated with each person's or each group's use of a word, and then developing joint working definitions. There was a continual stream of words and concepts to discuss; for example, blended learning, online learning, pedagogic design, formative assessment, summative assessment, forum, e-portfolio, evaluation, reflection, criticality, and so on. There was no alternative but to spend considerable lengths of time talking with each other, gradually building up a common understanding and common language. Then, even when mutual understanding had seemingly been achieved, deeper levels of difference emerged when applying them in practice:

> Even when we seem to all understand the language and the terminology, there's still a phase beyond that where you don't really know how that's understood until you come to do something practical, and then you realise. That's the real moment of truth. [BF04]

The teams also experienced differences in communication protocols, such as in use of emails and styles of interaction. For example, after several months of collaboration, one Chinese project manager gave the following feedback to the British partners:

> Sending mass emails is a good way. But when we send such emails, it will infringe Chinese principles. If I send such an email to a person in a higher position, s/he will feel offended. Nowadays we send various materials by email, but Chinese are special, superiors will feel particularly insulted. … Sending emails to superiors is not a good way, because it shows no regard for status differences between people. Some superiors dislike equality, so the best way to communicate with them is to submit a report, either in written or oral form. [CM21]

Another project member commented as follows:

> The UK colleagues are more likely to raise issues directly. Their logic is that issues should be raised first, then they'll try their best to find solutions. Even if they couldn't solve the problems immediately, at least they would know what the problems are. It's their culture, I think. But one part of the Chinese culture is that we are too shy to open our mouths to talk about certain things. … Sometimes the UK project manager sent some suggestions to us. When we got the suggestion, we usually got nervous and wondered 'must we do it immediately?' or 'are they commanding us to do this?' … But working together with them for a while I gradually realised that I could voice my opinions too and take time to think. It wasn't a big problem. [CF06]

Through all these communication challenges, the project members came to realize the crucial need for cultural mediators. Effective communication depends not only on the accurate translation of linguistic meaning, but also on the grasp of pragmatic meaning (which entails the understanding of background assumptions, implicit messages and so on). It was very hard for both British and Chinese members to understand many contextual issues and to pick up on a wide range of subtly communicated elements, especially at a distance, and so the role of bilingual, culturally aware individuals who could help facilitate mutual understanding emerged as vitally important. Such people were needed to describe and explain a range of issues, including the educational context, pedagogic beliefs and practices, management procedures and ways of working and interacting, as well to advise on best ways of handling such matters.

**Negotiating Different Pedagogic Viewpoints**

As can be seen from Figure 1, some of the tensions related to pedagogic issues as, understandably, members of all the project teams held (somewhat) different viewpoints on the design of their e-learning modules. Sometimes their approaches were basically compatible and so the negotiation only required some fine-tuning. In several cases, however, the viewpoints were significantly different, as the following comments from Chinese partners indicate:

> I don't think their content was as systematic as ours – they had rich but unstructured resources. Foreign students prefer to have rich resources so that they have the freedom to choose what they really want to know, while Chinese students are used to learning whatever you offer them. So if we give Chinese students the same rich resources, they would think we are asking them to read them all, they would feel stressedl. This is my own opinion. [CF16]

> We hold different ideas about the purposes of teaching. The Chinese teachers think: since we are your teachers, we started studying the field before you (the students) and we know more about the field than you (the students). On the other hand, the students always want to learn something from

> the teachers, for example certain theories, skills, or research methods, right? But I think the British teaching method is different. Their teaching was targeted to help the students to solve some problems. They always ask: how can I help the students to solve the problems? [CM15]

Nevertheless, several of the Chinese partners supported the student-centred approach that the British were advocating, acknowledging that it was in line with China's current educational reforms. Yet even when everyone agreed with the principle of a student-centred approach, this did not obviate the need for serious negotiation of viewpoints, as the following comments illustrate:

> It was quite early on, down in the gallery with [name of Chinese partner], and we were doing a presentation about our pedagogical approaches, and [name of Chinese partner] was talking about the way in which in his view he was way ahead of the rest of us in terms of what he called student centredness and in what I call learner centredness, but for him student centredness meant pretending he wasn't an expert, or hiding this notion of expertise within some strange model of 'let's question the professor'. [BF06]

> He had this idea that there should be what he called the default student. He wanted, I don't know if they were cartoon figures or real people or what, he didn't want a professor standing and going 'uh uh uh uh'. He wanted these model students, if you like, to demonstrate the thinking processes. Some of his ideas were very contrived and a bit patronising in a way. We had this discussion about patronising, and he realised, he said one day 'I know that in the west you will find these ways of doing things rather patronising, but believe me in my context it's what they want.' [BF13]

Members found it difficult to negotiate differences of opinion such as these for several reasons. Agreement in discussions was not necessarily reflected in module design and they did not always know how their feedback comments were (or were not) acted upon. Sometimes they lacked confidence in the expertise of other members and they were unsure how far they could press ideas.

> We have such rewarding discussions with them, and they seem so open, and we seem to be on a par in sharing ideas, and then – it's like the ePortfolio. We spent hours or days discussing it, and then it came back to summative, what they actually put in the modules was summative assessment. That's what happens when you think you're taking one step forward and you've achieved something here and then you go backwards. [BF04]

> Well, what I do is to give my comments but I haven't seen what has happened to those. And hand on heart, I can't tell you at this moment what's become of them. [BF06]

> I gave them lots and lots of details. But the real issue is that when I discussed them, I had experience behind me. They had no experience and so they couldn't connect them. [CM26]

> It's difficult, because if we get to a point, for example when talking about something that we do really believe in, let's say learner independence or something, and we're all getting very enthusiastic about it, if the Chinese partners do not seem to be going along with it, to what extent can we press it? Because that's like imperialism, isn't it. [BF13]

As a result, the outcomes of the negotiations were various. Sometimes members held onto core viewpoints and accommodated on others; sometimes they agreed to differ and developed different modules with different types of design.

> I think we came to a shared understanding that we would hold on to our agenda in terms of evidence-based practice, research as being integral to practice […]. We were holding on to that, we wouldn't let go of it, but we would flow around whatever way of tackling it our collaborators at [name of partner Chinese university] wanted to go with. There was no point in a head-on assault. [BM14]

> We had to actually argue, and in the end we said 'Well, can we do this in different ways. We understand your idea about voice, who is the voice of authority here, wanting to make it more equal, partnership level rather than professor and student, but can we not do it in other ways?' And eventually he said OK on that then. So we're all trying different ways of doing that now. [BF13]

## Fundamental Collaboration Issues

If we look across the collaboration challenges described above, three underlying threads are common to each of them: (in)equality, openness to new thinking, and questions of time and timing.

**(In)equality**

All the project teams found that establishing and maintaining equality between British and Chinese partners was often easier said than done, especially at a deep level, despite the equivalent rank of the universities. In terms of project goals, things seemed to start off satisfactorily, but before too long a key inequality emerged – inequality of funding. Neither stakeholder had originally intended this to occur, but personnel changes at Chinese government level had resulted in very significantly lower levels of funding to the Chinese universities than to the British universities. As a result, priorities began to shift and differences in goals began to emerge because of this funding inequality. In terms of pedagogic perspectives, things also seemed to start off well. Everyone expressed a keen desire to learn more about each other's educational systems and pedagogic viewpoints, yet deep down there were some complex concerns as one Chinese project manager acknowledged:

> To be frank, China has a long history of shutting the door to the outside world. In my opinion, we haven't opened up enough to the outside world and this minimises the effect of our communication with other countries. We still lack – it is maybe rather inappropriate to call it this – national confidence. I don't think we have enough national confidence. But it is really a fact of having great confidence on the one side – the UK – and lack of confidence on the other – China. [CM01]

At an individual level, there were also deep-seated assumptions regarding the level of advancement of other member's pedagogic principles and expertise in e-learning design. Sometimes others were assumed to be less experienced and less 'advanced'; sometimes they were assumed to be more so. Either way it impacted on project progress.

> What we'd accepted quite early on, really very naively, was that we thought [name of Chinese partner university] had the cutting edge platform, and of anyone, they'd got it right. […] It was a growing realisation actually the more we managed to talk to [name of Chinese project manager] and winkle these things out, that we realised their techies couldn't deliver what we wanted. And it took a surprising long time to find that out. [BF06]

With regard to communication, choosing English as the working language led to further inequalities in terms of workload, ease of arguing viewpoints and so on, as illustrated above. Avoiding imperialism (cf. Badley 2000) at a deep level was more difficult than anyone anticipated.

**Openness to New Thinking**

Closely linked with the issue of inequality was the question of openness to new thinking. One of the goals for the programme, specified by the stakeholders, was the achievement of innovation in e-learning design. Yet being creative and innovative requires experimentation, tolerance of uncertainty, and trust that the details of project goals will gradually unfold. For some project members this was very difficult to accept and handle. In terms of pedagogic viewpoints, it was even more challenging. Project leaders in both countries had been selected on the basis of their long-standing expertise and each understandably wanted to reflect that expertise in the design of the materials. It was not easy for any of them to have their names attached to modules that they personally would have designed very differently. Openness also applied to communication. Both stakeholders and project members in both Britain and China started with a fundamental assumption – that the working language of the projects would be English. No one questioned that or considered an alternative. Yet as time unfolded, everyone became aware of the impact of language choice and the communication process itself on project progress and realised that they needed to be open to new thinking about how best to manage language and communication in international projects.

**Time and Timing**

A third thread running through the collaboration challenges was time and timing. The teams found that implementing their projects was very time-consuming if there was to be true collaboration. Team members needed to get to know each other, to learn about each other's contexts, to negotiate goals and academic viewpoints, and so on. Doing all this in a foreign language (for many of the members) usually made it even more time-consuming. In addition, members needed to spend considerable amounts of time getting to know each other socially – having meals together, going on sightseeing trips, meeting each others' families and chatting about a wide range of topics. To stakeholders, this could seem like unnecessary 'extras'. Yet the teams found that this relationship-building was a key factor in enabling them to work through conflicts at later stages. The effectiveness with which they were able to work through the tensions that emerged mid-term was largely dependent on the amount of trust that they had built up among themselves during the earlier phases of the collaboration.

Another aspect of time that became apparent was the iterative nature of many of the processes. Project goals needed to be regularly revisited and updated; staff needed to continually reflect, both individually and as a team, on their relative openness to new thinking; and they needed to actively keep considering their use of language, communication strategies and communicative styles, checking how effective and/or acceptable they were to their partners. It was an ongoing, iterative process and this added even further to the time-consuming nature of the projects.

## Implications and Recommendations

The findings of this case study strongly support the research reported above on intercultural communication challenges and yield a number of implications for internationalisation strategies and professional development.

Firstly, they suggest that university senior managers need to look beyond 'connectivity goals' and pay greater attention to the differences and issues that may make collaboration difficult. Too often they imply that simply linking with a small number of other top-ranked universities will automatically lead to meaningful engagement (e.g. University of Exeter 2010: 20). Yet as previous research has shown and as this study has illustrated, key collaboration challenges and interaction issues need to be handled very effectively if differences are to be negotiated synergistically. Failure to truly engage with differences may make the collaboration process more comfortable yet will run the risk of ending in mediocrity (Distefano and Maznevski 2000). Only if differences are embraced and worked through will the emergence of new ideas be maximised.

Senior managers, funding bodies and academic staff all need to be fully aware that this process is very time-consuming. In addition to the time needed for handling the collaboration challenges and issues, teams need to build mutual trust and understanding among each other so that there is enough 'glue' to hold them together when pressures later arise. If they have not spent enough time learning about each other and building bonds, they may fail to navigate effectively the conflicts that will almost inevitably arise. So if senior managers and funding bodies reduce or severely limit the timescale of projects for pragmatic reasons, this is likely to be highly counterproductive; it may well shipwreck the partnership completely.

If grappling with difference is the key to maximising creativity and new thinking, yet dealing with difference is difficult and time-consuming, this raises another policy question: how similar can partners be before the likelihood of significant new thinking is reduced? As Earley and Gardner (2005) point out, people work most comfortably with similar others, and so university staff may choose to team up with those who have similar systems, viewpoints and/or perspectives to themselves. This is attractive not only because it is comfortable, but also because it may seem more likely to lead to 'successful' project completion. However, it may also bring a serious downside. The lack of diversity may result in mediocrity – insufficient innovation for tackling the difficult global problems that so many universities aspire to address. Careful consideration thus needs to be given to level of difference when choosing project partners, and university staff should be wary of being too conservative in this.

From a professional development perspective, the study supports earlier calls (e.g. Badley 2000; Brookes and Becket 2011; Leask 2004) for greater attention to be paid to the preparedness of the academic staff. This not only entails pre-project training, but ongoing individual and team reflection during the collaboration itself, with sensitivity to issues of power, open engagement with new ideas, and a willingness to change and develop. Moreover, the extensive intercultural learning that staff gain from the whole collaboration process needs to be 'harvested' for the benefit of others. As Leask (2004) points out, such learning is highly valuable not only for other international education collaborations but also for implementing 'internationalisation at home'. In order to maximise the effectiveness of this professional development, it would be extremely useful for staff at home and abroad to have access to high quality professional development resources, with case study data, to help them reflect more deeply on their professional experiences and to deal more effectively with the challenges they face. This could be on the lines of the HE Academy's resources for handling international students (http://www.heacademy.ac.uk/internationalisation/) or the Global People website (http://www.globalpeople.org.uk/). The gathering of greater amounts of rich case study data is needed for this. This would best be obtained from longitudinal case studies, in which discourse data is collected in addition to interview data. That could yield very helpful insights into the negotiation processes that people engage in and the strategies that are most effective for handling them. This in turn would offer greater clarity and grounding to the notion of intercultural competence. De Wit and Beelen (forthcoming) point out that although international educators have usefully started shifting their focus from activities *per se* to concerns about outcomes and competencies, it can be unclear and vague what such competence entails. More case study research, especially of a longitudinal nature and incorporating discourse data, is needed in order to address this concern.

There is clearly a major research and development agenda that needs tackling!

**Notes**

[1] University strategies examined were: Anglia Ruskin, Aston, Bath, Bedfordshire, Birmingham, Bolton, Bournemouth, Bradford, Bristol, Cardiff, Coventry, Durham, Edinburgh, Edinburgh Napier, Exeter, Glasgow, Imperial, Kings College London, Lancaster, Leeds, Leeds Metropolitan, Leicester, Lincoln, Liverpool, Loughborough, London School of Economics, Manchester, Newcastle, Nottingham, Nottingham Trent, Oxford, Plymouth, Queen Mary, Reading, Royal Holloway, Salford, Sheffield, Sheffield Hallam, School of Oriental and African Studies, Southampton, St Andrews, Strathclyde,

Sunderland, Surrey, Sussex, Swansea, University College London, Warwick, Westminster, York. Where both a university strategy and an international strategy were accessible, both were examined.

[2] It is quite possible that collaborators on international research projects may face fewer or different challenges than those working on international education projects. However, studies by Teargarden et al (2005) and Hanges et al (2005) suggest that when the teams are large, the problems can be similar.

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