The Internationalist

Episode six transcript: International collaboration – a fairer future?

Natasha Lokhun:

Hello, and welcome to this latest edition of The Internationalist - higher education matters, a podcast from the Association of Commonwealth Universities. I'm Natasha Lokhun. In this series, we're looking at the responsibility of universities to confront both the past and the present. I'm asking who gets to learn and who gets to teach in today's society, where the legacy of empire is still an open and often painful issue. Universities are places of learning and have a critical role in creating open and fairer societies, but they also reflect the world in which they operate and they can even reinforce inequalities.

In today's episode, the final one in the series, we're talking about international collaboration in higher education. Universities work by sharing ideas and people across borders. They are dependent upon this. It's how knowledge is created, shared, and built upon, but the nature of the global economy means that universities in the so-called developed world, the global North, are the ones with the money and therefore the power. They have the means to fund projects around the world, and to support academics and students from different countries. So how can we have a system of collaboration that is fair, and that allows the universities in the global South to enhance their capabilities and ultimately to have a more equal relationship with those in the global North? To talk about this today, I'm joined by Kirsty Kaiser, Implementation Manager at the Research Fairness Initiative, which is based in South Africa. Hi, Kirsty.

Kirsty Kaiser:

Hi Natasha. Thanks for having me.

Natasha Lokhun:

And Professor Imran Rahman, Dean of the School of Business at the University of Liberal Arts Bangladesh. Imran, I'll come to you first actually to ask, given obviously that you're working at a university in the global South, this notion of collaboration between universities in the global North and South, in practice, do you think these relationships are actually collaborative?

Professor Imran Rahman:

They are collaborative, but the degree of collaboration, there is a equal element to them, but yes, I would say by and large they are collaborative. So I wouldn't be too negative about it.

Natasha Lokhun:

And if I may pick up on that point about some elements being unequal, what are some of those elements, do you think?

Professor Imran Rahman:

Well, I suppose one is the fact that language is an element, publishing is an element, in terms of research design, the participation of the global South during the phase of designing the research questions could be higher than it usually is. So these are some of the critical things which make the relationship an unequal one.

Natasha Lokhun:

And is that a picture that you recognize, Kirsty, from your experience?

Kirsty Kaiser:

Yeah, so I definitely agree with those points, and I think those are very aligned with the individual researcher at a certain level, and I think there is also the level of institutional imbalance. So for example, ability to deal with research contracting, and the ability of Southern partners to be able to actually negotiate those partnerships and ensure that they are also getting some benefit out of them that is beyond having, for example, a lab built or having some PhD researchers trained, which are all very important things, but I think there's a lot more to it.

Natasha Lokhun:

And can you tell us a bit more about your work at the Research Fairness Initiative and how you're, I guess, trying to address those imbalances? And you spoke about at an individual and an institutional level, are you operating at both of those levels or how does that work?

Kirsty Kaiser:

Yeah, so the RFI, or the Research Fairness Initiative, was developed by COHRED in 2016. COHRED is the Council on Health Research for Development, but essentially what we've done is we've created a reporting tool that helps institutions to assess where they are at with regard to a number of different aspects of partnerships and helps them to also plan for how they can improve in those areas. And so it is very much for the institutional level rather than for individual researchers or individual projects. And yeah, like I said, we just try and help institutions not only from developing countries, but also high income countries to improve the equitability of the partnership policies and practices.

Natasha Lokhun:

And Imran, do you think that this initiative like RFI, and it's interesting that it's targeted at universities in low, middle, and high income countries, do you think an initiative like that ... How far does it go, I guess, to addressing the issues that you spoke about and the ones that you're facing at a university level in Bangladesh?

Professor Imran Rahman:

To be honest, I hadn't heard of it, and I actually just looked it up an hour back. I think we need something like this because individually, global South researchers are talking about the decolonization, they're writing papers, this and that, but it has to all come together. So I think RFI has an amazing mandate and I'm sure RFI doesn't have a foothold in Bangladesh, I'd be happy to connect some of my researcher colleagues and friends with RFI. And if I can just mention something that you asked about the inequality, I think I need to make a distinction between hard science research, like engineering research, or research in biochemistry, and stuff like that, I think the problem is more acute in the humanities, social sciences research, because there's so much more leeway in terms of what should be the priority in the research focus or in the research questions, whereas in something like engineering, I would think that there'd be probably far greater agreement from both the global South and the global North researchers about what are the important things in a particular research. That's my layman's interpretation of that.

Natasha Lokhun:

So if I understand you correctly, Imran, you're saying that because humanities, social sciences, there is more leeway, as you said, there's more room for manoeuvre, you feel that that has an impact, or the imbalance in power, I guess, in the relationship between universities can come out as part of that? Is that right?

Professor Imran Rahman:

I mean if I can think of in Bangladesh what are some of the collaborative research is about, a lot of it is about climate change adaptation, et cetera, because we are one of the hardest hit countries in terms of global warming's effects, then on poverty, growth, microcredit, all these things, even medical research at the village level or something. So it seems that too often research questions seem to be formulated or framed somewhere else, somewhere outside the actual geographical area,

or the social or ecological setting in which the research projects are supposed to be anchored. And that means from the get go, the research design, often the global South researchers feel that they are working on a project which is asking perhaps not the most important research questions.

Kirsty Kaiser:

Can I jump in there because I think that's a really good point, and it's something that we definitely address with our tool, and it's something that has come up in conversations that I've had with other people who are interested in this area. And I think there's a significant problem of research not actually being in line with priorities of the communities where the research is actually happening. And I think very often research priorities are not necessarily determined by the Southern partners, or they don't really necessarily have a say in what those priorities should be, and I think that's an area that specifically needs to be addressed to make sure that the research is relevant and has impact, and it can be done in a way that is sensitive to the communities where it is taking place, et cetera, et cetera. So I think that's a really good point, Imran. And yeah, it's definitely something that I have come across in my conversations about this type of thing.

Natasha Lokhun:

It's interesting to, I guess, take that point further and elaborate on it, and reflect on how much the imbalance, the inequality, the issues that might prevent a collaboration being equal, how much that's about money, and the source of funding and where that comes from, and how much it's actually about decision-making, and who has that power. And Imran, I don't know if you have thoughts on that, bearing in mind what we were just saying about research design specifically.

Professor Imran Rahman:

Yes, I mean, money will be and continue to be an important determining factor about who has the relatively more power in the relationship. Countries like Bangladesh, where we have so little of ... I mean it's piddly amounts of domestically sourced research funds, we have to depend on funds coming into the country from abroad. Now, a lot of the funds come in different ways. I mean, for example, Bangladesh is a major recipient of multi-lateral donor funds, World Banks of the world, and the Asian Development Banks, the DFIDs, the USAIDs, et cetera. And these projects often have a research element, but these are not very independent because they have a mandate, they have a connection with whatever is the goals of the particular project. But in these cases, the local researchers have very little leeway.

But sometimes what I find, we are working, we are talking to a very good university in the USA about participating with them, and the US team actually includes a Bangladeshi who's a full-time faculty member there, so that has actually helped the question here because the team itself has a Bangladeshi who is a full-time academic in that university. So that is one great way to get more say from the global South, because he knows what the situations are, he knows both the donor country research interests and he knows what are the priorities for the host country research as well. So this is one interesting area that ... So it's not all doom and gloom. There are cases where actually we can see some changes coming about, but these are far and few between.

Natasha Lokhun:

I definitely wanted to touch upon that, as you say, it not just being doom and gloom, but looking at solutions. And is there an ideal model of international collaboration? Is there just one model, for example? Kirsty, I don't know if you have thoughts on that and how might we get to this model or models?

Kirsty Kaiser:

So I think at the moment that maybe is not a model, but I think that we're on our way to getting to one. So I know that for what we're trying to do at COHRED, what we would essentially like to happen over time and as we get more institutions using the RFI tool, et cetera, is that eventually we'd like to develop standards of good practice for research partnerships that would help institutions to understand actually what they should be doing if they want to be good partners.

But I think getting there will involve really taking into account that low, middle income country partners need to be treated more fairly, they need to be treated more equitably, and it is

about decolonizing these kinds of research partnerships. So it deals with things like, like I said, priority setting, management capacity, financial management capacity, data ownership, IP rights. All of these issues that come up within partnerships, it is possible to find solutions for them and I think that we are on our way there, and there are many institutions who have recognized the need for this to happen and are trying to work towards it, so it's really just about gaining this momentum towards a better future for research partnerships.

Natasha Lokhun:

And can you give us an example of what good practice looks like in one of the areas you identified?

Kirsty Kaiser:

Sure.

Natasha Lokhun:

You were talking about financial management or IP rights.

Kirsty Kaiser:

Yeah. So for example, if you think about data ownership or IP rights, I'll give you just a very broad example without naming any names, but we had some institutions in an African country who went through the process of using our tool, and they all produced reports, only one was published in the end because the others just never got around to publishing their reports, but with those three reports, we found that all three institutions within that specific country, not one of them had a template for material transfer agreements. So they were busy doing research with partners and none of them had material transfer agreements, or any kind of legal or contractual obligations in regards to that. And so we were able to identify that for them, and now their own government has actually gone and put a material transfer agreement into place that then all institutions in that country are able to now use as part of their research partnership and collaboration practice.

Natasha Lokhun:

And Imran, your thoughts on the ideal model or models of international collaboration.

Professor Imran Rahman:

Our most effective partnerships are those with institutions where co-designing is built into the project. Global researchers are themselves well-versed in the need to decolonize the research academy. Also, I would say that mandating capacity building for global North researchers along these lines would be probably a good step forward.

Natasha Lokhun:

And what would that capacity building look like? What would that involve? I mean do you think there's something specific that should be mandated as part of that?

Kirsty Kaiser:

In terms of building capacity, it's very important to also think about it as a long-term thing and something that should be sustainable, and that capacity should be built in terms of systems rather than just a lab, or training a student, or that kind of thing. So ultimately the capacity building should really be focused on helping LMIC institutions to be better able to manage the research themselves, to be able to, for example, apply for grants as the PIs and actually be successful in getting those grants, and being able to have the capacity that they are able to innovate following whatever the results of their research are. So for example, if a vaccine is found through research in an LMIC, why can't that vaccine be developed within that LMIC rather than somewhere else and then brought back? So I think it's really important to think about the sustainability of building those capacities up, and making sure that they are a long-term thing rather than something that will be there for five years, and then following that, it's not useful anymore.

Natasha Lokhun:

So I think what you're saying is, in some ways, if we think about collaboration between universities, we might think about research projects that involve specific researchers or departments, we might

think about institutional agreements, but I guess what you're saying, Kirsty, is that it goes beyond that. It is about systems and the working, and in some ways through collaboration between universities. It can really have a wider impact as well, I guess.

Kirsty Kaiser:

Yeah, definitely. And I think what we also have to be a little bit careful of is we don't want LMICs to become charity cases because that's not what they are. And I think we also need to see some more investment from them themselves in their own research systems. So it shouldn't only be about high income countries giving funds to try and develop low income countries, it's about there being true collaboration on that point to help them to become better able to manage on their own.

Natasha Lokhun:

And Imran, bearing that in mind or thinking about that framework, is there a collaboration that you know of that you think is working well at the moment?

Professor Imran Rahman:

Yes, I can think of several, including one in my university which is working well, where it's basically related to climate change research. And we don't want to be a charity case, but actually, we found that in one of our collaborations, and this was with a fairly good UK university, which is far older than we are, our university is only about 18 years old, and we found that they were good in some things, but we were better in something which I'd never figured, and that was in applying for international grants.

Natasha Lokhun:

So there's definitely an element here of appreciation, as you say, of the skillsets that are on both sides, and an understanding of where those strengths are and harnessing them. And I guess before you get to that, it's about coming to the table without assumptions, I suppose.

Professor Imran Rahman:

I don't know whether you know this, but universities like ours, which is a private university, private universities came about in the early 1990s. We are still not allowed to offer PhDs and MPHils, so that means we are not being able to develop or increase our capability to do research. Having said that, some of our faculty members who are doing research actually got their PhDs and their training, and even worked in the global North, and now their skillset in some cases would be comparable to the skillsets of our global North partners. But sometimes there is a feeling that that is not recognized. We are branded together in a lump, rather than looking individually into who's bringing what into the research negotiation table.

Natasha Lokhun:

Kirsty, did you have any reflections on that?

Kirsty Kaiser:

Yeah, so I think that's a very good point, and I think that there's often this misconception that high income country partners are the ones that have all of the knowledge, and all of the expertise, and that type of thing. But I think we often forget that the LMIC partners provide expertise and knowledge at the local level, which is often something that if a high income country partner had to come, and try and do the research on their own, they wouldn't know how to access the local populations, how to interact with them, et cetera, et cetera. And so I think there needs to be this knowledge that LMIC partners are also skilled. They are also skilled and they also definitely have something to bring to the table. But I also do feel that sometimes the LMIC partners don't recognize that within themselves too.

Natasha Lokhun:

So I did want to ask what you think the barriers are to change, or what needs to change to move us forward. You said that you are seeing good practice, we are seeing momentum. What needs to change in order to really drive this forward?

Kirsty Kaiser:

So I think that there's very often fear on the side of the lower income country partners. They're afraid to maybe show that their, for example, research management capacity might need some work or some development. They're also afraid to say something if there is inequitability because they'd rather have the funding, for example, than not be able to be part of a collaboration, because they know that funding is important for their own development. So I think from that side, it's fear. And then I think from high income country sides, I think very often there is an acknowledgement that there's a problem, but there might be some universities or institutions where they're scared of acknowledging that because they don't want to seem like they are inequitable, or colonialist, or anything like that. So I think fear plays a pretty big role in both sides, but I think we just need to move past that and understand that this is for the future, and we have to get past that, and be transparent, and open, and accountable to one another.

Natasha Lokhun:

And that fear, Imran, is that something that you recognize, that you agree with? That there is this fear on both sides, which I think is interesting.

Professor Imran Rahman:

Yes, I would say there is fear. I think also within Bangladesh, universities need to collaborate with each other instead of just working on their own. We need to have platforms where we can plan together, have a bigger pool of resourceful and skillful researchers. That's something which hopefully will happen.

Natasha Lokhun:

And thinking about the specific context of Bangladesh, which is a rapidly developing and evolving country, but also faces challenges, and you spoke about climate change as an example, how do you think the changes that are happening within the country are going to affect the relationships that universities like yours have with universities in other countries? What might things look like 30 years from now? And also thinking about this idea of working together collectively as well?

Professor Imran Rahman:

I can already see that even in this short time, even in my university, that we have been able to make some models, but at least we are now collaborating. Right now, I would say we have four or five international collaboration, which was unthinkable 10 years ago. So things are moving forward. And I think I'm hopeful that, at least in Bangladesh, will make a bigger impact on research. We are still far behind in terms of applications, and that's another area basically which we don't talk about where there are also problems. And one of the papers I was sent by one of my colleagues was on ... There was apparently a demand for having a triple-blind system in terms of publication. Normally, as you know, the peer review system uses a double-blind system, but the triple-blind system is where, for example, even the editor would not know the identity or the affiliation of the author until the end of the whole process.

Natasha Lokhun:

Kirsty, do you think that's something that would help?

Kirsty Kaiser:

I'm not sure. I'm not sure whether it would help. Maybe, it might help. I think that often thought the problem of authorship starts with the collaboration itself though and LMIC partners not necessarily being involved in the whole process as much as they should be, but maybe having a triple-blind system could work.

Natasha Lokhun:

It's an interesting idea. It's certainly one to think about for the future.

I think it's been really interesting today to look at what collaboration really looks like at an individual level between researchers and also more institutional levels as well, and thinking about the challenges, and how an imbalance between universities plays out at those different levels. I think also what I've learned is when we're talking about change and addressing some of these challenges, there's a real need for the approach to be sustainable and for there to be long term solutions that

don't just build the capacity of institutions, but that also result in more relevant outcomes and impact for those communities and those who that research is for. I'd like to thank our guests for today, Kirsty Kaiser, Implementation Manager at the Research Fairness Initiative, and Imran Rahman, Dean of the School of Business at the University of Liberal Arts Bangladesh.

And this is the final episode of the series. We've covered so much over these past six episodes. It's been really incredible. We've looked at what the phrase decolonizing higher education actually means, we've talked about curricula and how to create a sense of belonging within universities, and we've even discussed colonial symbols and reparations. So if you haven't already, please do have a listen to the previous episodes and let us know what you think. We hope that this series of The Internationalist - higher education matters has been valuable, but most importantly we hope that it's made you think a little bit further about these topics which are so relevant to our lives right now.

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