Trying to be better partners: Key insights from an internal GCRF Strategy review at SOAS, University of London

Dr Romina Istratii

GCRF Project Officer

The internal review

Context and aims

Context and aims

- research project was conducted to facilitate the implementation of SOAS's GCRF Strategy (2018-2020). It aimed to investigate more systematically current barriers related to finance, contracts and compliance in international collaborative research faced in-house and in partner countries, understand current approaches to partnership building and identify possible improvements.

- it included holding semi-structured interviews with SOAS staff in the pre- and post-award teams, Contracts, Finance and HR, Project Managers, Principal Investigators and partners overseas (as feasible). A total of 27 interviews were conducted between the months of May-July 2020.

- was conducted by Dr Romina Istratii in her role as GCRF Project Officer, overseen by the then Director of Research Dr Alex Lewis.

- an ethics review was submitted, which was reviewed by the SOAS Ethics and Governance Officer.

Key insights related to research development process in LMICs

Partners' conditions and research contexts

- Different types of research environments (countries could be described as donor-driven or could lack a strong academic culture as known in the UK, etc.). This could influence the types of collaborations local partners will anticipate.

- research partners in low- and middle-income countries (LMICs) have different needs and different levels of capacity in research development and grant management (depending on institution, career level/experience of the partner, etc.).

- institutional processes in partner organisations can be as bureaucratic and time-consuming as they are often at UK HEIs (approval-process may be centralised or highly hierarchical). In some countries, any new research collaboration has to be approved by a designated state agency, which can cause delays that need to be considered in the timeline of the project.

- it is important to understand local hierarchies and power dynamics within institutions/partner teams and how these can influence partner engagement on the ground.

- partners may be in need of advance payments to be able to fulfil the agreed project activities, but highly bureaucratic payment regimes followed by UK HEIs can make this practically difficult.

Key insights related to PIs

Considerations

- PIs often choose to work with research partners from the 'elite', usually westernised, class in the partner countries. 'Big names' may be favoured over lower-ranking staff or less established researchers/academics.

- PIs have an incentive to work with the same partners who have proven reliable and responsive, which could be assessed in conjunction with the dominance of a few elite institutions in international collaborative research

- speaking the languages of research communities was highlighted as important, although not doing so was not always or necessarily described as a barrier given the majority of PIs working in English-speaking African and Asian countries. Building cultural competence, however, was pronounced as a priority by all PIs in the process of building trust-based relationships.

- PIs emphasised the importance of adapting to the research context, understanding how the communities involved might respond to the UK-based PI and research team with reflexivity of their positionalities, relationship to histories of colonialism and other political, cultural or personal parameters.

Key insights related to funders

Considerations

- while UKRI allows for leading institutions to be based in LMICs in some schemes, in practice they make it very difficult for LMIC institutions to do so (e.g. when determining eligibility).

- the tight deadlines of most funding schemes may not give academics sufficient time to outline and negotiate all project details with their partners at the application stage. Funder incentives can encourage an instrumentalist or dishonest approach to talking about partnerships in funding proposals.

- schemes that expect the PI to have intellectual exclusivity to the research can discourage PIs from entering into partnerships to achieve more competitive applications (e.g. ERC monobeneficiary grants). While co-Is can have intellectual autonomy within ERC grants, local assistants do not due to lacking the qualifications to be included in the proposals as co-Is.

- in some countries when workshops are held, participants expect a daily allowance to be provided, but the funders may not allow this, which places PIs in need to negotiate and find alternative solutions.

'Equitable partnerships': critiques and practical alternatives

Definitions

- equitable as designing, implementing and disseminating the research project collaboratively (PI, Politics)

Alternatives

- 'creative or dialectical partnerships': project is developed on the basis of own research and experience – an expression of personal creativity. Simultaneously, a creative process to bring partners, collaborators and participants in to achieve reciprocity and mutual learning (PI, Film & Screen Studies)

Critiques

- speaking in terms of egalitarian partnerships would not be realistic since it is mostly an aspiration
  Why? Budget decisions asymmetric; western PI can more easily walk away from a partnership, although PI might often rely on their local partner/'reverse dependency' (PI, Anthropology; PI, Linguistics)
- Language can be misused. The concept can help to counter some Northern researchers' harmful attitude that they know best, but it might be deployed to suggest that, invariably, knowledge always sits with the Global South – need to find the right balance (PI, Economics)

Trying to be better partners: A roadmap for the future

PIs

- discussing explicitly the expectations of the project and the deliverables with the research partners and agreeing these at the early stages of the project. Agree with partners the allocation of costs and delivery dates in a great detail (consider that research contracts tend to omit important details about the project).

- academics can work to understand the strengths of the local partners and to leverage better the partners' resourcefulness. To encourage this, partners could be granted more independence in implementing project activities. Moreover, PIs can encourage research staff in their projects to improve their research skills through different training activities.

- the best kind of collaborations emerged when the PI or lead institution served as a facilitator and abstained from dictating to partners how to do things.

Professional services

- partnerships can be more reciprocal and western PIs can learn more from their partners if partners are enabled to proceed with the project activities timely (e.g. payments, contracts, etc.).

- it is important to understand the modus operandi of collaborating institutions, their conditions and different contexts and adapt to these per context as feasible.

Funders

- UKRI has a duty to be more involved in supporting LMICs researchers in the application process.

- funding bodies need to understand better the trade-offs of developing mutually beneficial international research projects (PIs can invest extra time in building strong, reciprocal partnerships, but the trade-offs need to be recognised, e.g. fewer publications).

- over-monitoring can be profoundly frustrating and disappointing, especially when there is no mechanism to feed back to the funder about how this due diligence mechanism affects the team and how it might be improved.