The Association of Commonwealth Universities

Universities, faith and respect: background paper
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The potential for stronger links between institutions

Interuniversity links, or partnerships as they are sometimes termed, have until more recent times been interpreted principally in financial terms – such partnerships were typically considered as a means to strengthen the globalising efforts of universities to help students, academics and faculties become more competitive in global markets (Etling, 2005). However, it is increasingly being realised that such collaboration and cooperation has much broader benefits with the potential to increase individual and institutional capacities on different holistic levels. Interuniversity collaborations play an important role in valuing and understanding cultures that are different to our own and can be particularly drawn upon for interfaith dialogue. It offers an opportunity for staff and students to engage in discussion with other institutions and demonstrate a real mutual appreciation for all involved. It is perhaps a shame that much of the international and national partnership activity 'goes unnoticed and unsung at sector and policy level' (Fielden, 2009) due to a lack of comprehensive/systematic data collection within universities and at sector level. More needs to be known about what makes partnerships effective, especially when placed in an interfaith context which has endless possibilities for the promotion of mutual understanding and respect.

Broadly speaking, different types of partnership programmes can include:

• Research collaboration: individual, departmental and institutional collaborations; applied research; opportunities for joint funding; split-site PhDs.

• Teaching: branch campuses; joint and dual degrees; corporate involvement; language courses; studying abroad; international volunteering.

One such example of interuniversity programmes could be the UNESCO initiative 'University Twinning and Networking Programme' (UNITWIN/UNESCO), which promotes interuniversity cooperation and networking through knowledge-sharing across borders. It is aimed at addressing pressing challenges while promoting cultural diversity by pooling knowledge.

Other benefits

Aside from the benefits that interuniversity partnerships have in contributing to interfaith mutual understanding for students, there are also staff benefits (Fielden, 2009):

• The understanding of other cultures and other ways of learning and teaching that come from working alongside colleagues in partner institutions and overseas.
• The growing international research opportunities presented to staff with the chance to build on their research strengths with appropriate partners.
• The consequential ability to improve interactions with international students at home and provide them with a learning experience that starts with a better understanding of their home environment.
• The opportunities to meet international academic staff and forge research or consultancy collaborations in the country concerned.

Ideological aspects

'Relational connectedness' (Ferrier-Kerr & Haxton, 2014): Engaging in partnerships places the importance of relationships very much at its core. Relational connectedness comprises both 'intra-connectedness' and 'inter-connectedness' (Gibbs, 2006). The former emphasises the importance of a deep harmonious connection to one's inner-self and identity, whereas the latter is concerned with 'a deep and meaningful connectedness with others and with the world around us, including time and place'. Such interfaith, cross-

institutional interactions therefore have the potential to encourage the flourishing of mutual appreciation and respect for others by bringing this strong sense of knowing oneself and another to the relationship.

Taking relational connectedness one step further, there is a spiritual level of 'extra-connectedness' (op cit.) that implies the connection of self to more spiritual aspects of life. Palmer (1998) has described this as authentic spirituality which 'trusts that any path walked with integrity will take us to a path of knowledge'. Applied to an interfaith-dialogue context, the spiritual level of relational connectedness could therefore imply the achievement of a higher purpose within oneself and across humanity.

The concept of authenticity is another important conceptual aspect for partnerships – being self-aware and self-accepting, authentic in actions and relationships to build enduring relationships based on trust and credibility. Rather than focusing on the space between people, by focusing on the sharing of insight, values, communication and commitment there can be a shift to the 'inherent connectedness' of relationships (Ferrier-Kerr & Haxton, 2014).

'Communities of practice' (op cit.): Communities of practice can exist in any type of organisation and are usually based on participation. It is important that their value is recognised by an institution as more specifically within an interfaith context they have the potential to contribute greatly not only to staff and student personal growth, but also within wider society. The concept of a community of practice points toward the systematic sharing of knowledge to also affect wider performance of the institution. Successful communities of practice embody characteristics such as a shared vision and sense of purpose, collective responsibility, reflective professional enquiry, and collaboration. There is a collective power that can be drawn upon from having a shared vision.

Complexities

It may not be until collaboration has begun that partners will discover the particular challenges that are relevant to them or the project.

While it may seem that all academic institutions are similar to an external observer, each collaborating partner has its own culture which must be appreciated for collaborations to develop and succeed. The criteria for success can vary between institutions and it is therefore important for each institution to define what it seeks from each collaboration so that success can be recognised on both sides.

Further, the faculty and key staff involved in taking forward institutional links are essentially the advocates for the activity. If the wider benefits of such collaborations are to be realised within the university then it is essential to address the great deal of time and expertise that such staff are investing by backing and supporting their efforts.

Given the different socio-economic positioning of countries across the Commonwealth there is the potential for asymmetries to arise between partner universities on different levels – in resources (technological, financial etc.), capabilities and also in the question of power. In any relationship there is an intrinsic question of power (whether it manifests itself negatively or not) which needs to be balanced if the benefits of interfaith dialogue are to be genuinely achieved from such cross-institutional links. When considering 'North-South' partnerships it could be especially important that 'Southern' universities drive the partnership process and take joint ownership to not risk 'yet another episode in which the powerful talk to themselves' (Hopper, 1998: 27). Without such genuine joint ownership then partnerships could be somewhat disingenuous. Realistic partnerships need to be developed that take into consideration the imbalances of resources and time between partners and do not lead toward dominance by one side.

Questions for consideration

- Is it necessary to have a clear strategy when engaging in interuniversity links?
- What are the roles of the partners and who decides for whom?
- How can institutions ensure that partnerships are built on the basis of genuine equality and that one partner doesn't overshadow the other?
- Where does the responsibility lie for interuniversity links (i.e. the faculty, vice-chancellor, etc.)?
- How does one engage institutions in partnerships so that the benefits of linkages are realised?
- How does an institution address funding and time issues in order to prioritise interuniversity links?