

Cross-cultural Educational Research Partnerships:

Reflections on Pacific Experience and Collaboration

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Introduction

The literature on international research partnerships has grown rapidly across many fields and disciplines in recent decades, with initial work emphasising the potential and benefits to be gained from such developments. Within this literature, much attention has also been given to North-South research collaboration, with increasing numbers of accounts presenting detailed case studies of successful initiatives. To date, however, few studies have focussed explicitly upon the process of collaboration in ways that have generated critical reflection, and have improved our collective understanding of the dilemmas encountered in sustaining cross-cultural research partnerships. This paper explores the origins, strengths and limitations of one North-South research partnership, relating to teacher education in Fiji, in which we have been involved. The analysis draws upon the related international literature, interrogates the partnership experience from a diversity of cultural and professional perspectives, and explores ways of generating more context sensitive and sustainable research partnerships for future educational and social research within and beyond the Pacific.

Research Partnerships for International Development

Much has been written on the broad theme of international partnerships in the development literature, with many writers advocating partnership models and collaborative strategies for educational and social development (King, 1990; Gmelin et al., 2001; Chisholm and Steiner-Khamsi, 2009). Such thinking has, in turn, played a part in influencing debates concerning cross-cultural educational research, the nature of North-South and South-South research collaboration, and related implications for research capacity building (Gibbons et al., 1994; KFPE, 1998). Research funders, for example, increasingly support international collaborations, as Stephens's (2009) edited, and multidisciplinary, volume of case studies of British Council funded projects demonstrates. Within such work it is argued that this can do much to strengthen local relevance and context sensitivity, and improve the impact of research upon policy and practice – at the same time as enhancing research capacity in both the North and the South (DFID, 2005, 2008).

While this advocacy literature continues to grow, and its influence is increasingly visible, few studies have interrogated the detailed practical experiences of cross-cultural educational research partnerships. This is especially so for those with a North-South dimension, and even less has been done in the small states context. Some work carried out by our own team members has, nevertheless, made a contribution, although this has drawn largely upon Africa-UK experience. Barrett and colleagues (2011, 2014), for example, contrast the perspectives and views of African and UK partners involved in collaborative research on the quality of education in East and West Africa, and upon a joint initiative for research training at the University of Buea in Cameroon. In doing so they identify

significant issues relating to equity in the distribution of research leadership and rewards; to the dilemmas faced in meeting fixed deadlines; to challenges relating to space, resources and time; and to related discourse and ethical challenges and implications. This is a useful starting point so we will return to this experience later within the context of our own Pacific analysis.

With regard to the literature of education in small states, writers such as Crossley and Holmes (2001) and Louisy (2001, 2004) go on to argue that the strengthening of educational research capacity is especially important in such contexts where the influence of external personnel, agencies and research findings has often been insufficiently grounded in local needs and priorities. Within the Caribbean, Holmes and Crossley (2004:207) thus note how contemporary postcolonial theory has helped to reveal how ‘much academic and policy research still has a strong western and positivistic orientation’. This helps to explain why some Caribbean researchers have been ‘stretching the boundaries of research to include more informal, but nevertheless intellectual, activities such as work of the storyteller and Calypsonian’ to enable local insights, values and cultural perspectives to influence both research findings and related policy formulations. Within the South Pacific the work of Tuhiwai Smith (1999), Thaman (2000; 2006; 2014) and Koya Vaka’uta (2015) has articulated a similar and strong case for the strengthening the place of Pacific values, cultures and ethics in both educational development and educational research. It is in this spirit and tradition that the present collaborative study was developed as a joint initiative between The University of the South Pacific (USP), the University of Bristol and the University of Nottingham. The details of this partnership are outlined below.

The USP/Bristol/Nottingham Teacher Education Research Partnership: 2014-2016

The project built upon long term personal contacts and friendships, and developed as part of the appointment of Michael Crossley as an Adjunct Professor of Education at USP from 2012. Initial discussions with School of Education colleagues at USP indicated that the strengthening of teacher education was a contemporary priority throughout the 12 nations of the region served by the University. This is evidenced in national and regional reports such as **Fiji Education Commission Report** (2000), **Forum Basic Education Action Plan** (FBEAP, 2001) and **Pacific Education Development Framework** (2009 – 2015). To cite the Fiji National Curriculum Framework (2013) ‘Teacher preparedness is critical to the effective implementation and on-going monitoring, assessment, evaluation and continuous improvement of curriculum development and delivery. This highlights the significance of teacher training and education as well as periodic professional development opportunities’ (p.6). Given the central place of the USP School of Education in providing high quality teacher education throughout the region research into teacher education is, appropriately, one of its own current priorities. This was highlighted in a 2010 Departmental Review (USP, 2010), and can be seen in the contributions made by School of Education personnel to a new edited volume that identifies current educational challenges issues and priorities across the South Pacific (Crossley, Hancock and Sprague, 2015).

In the same volume, Johansson – Fua (2015), the Director of the USP Institute of Education, points out how improving the quality of teacher education lies at the heart of efforts to improve the quality of education for all; and Sharma and colleagues (2015: 253) demonstrate how in Fiji ‘ The dramatic increase in student population of the urban schools has not only yielded student and staff diversity, but also increased the demand for appropriately qualified teachers’, and for more systematic programmes for continuing professional development. More positively, there is also much evidence of Pacific

teacher education leading innovative work on education for sustainable development (Koya Vaka'uta et al. 2010), and in pioneering advances in distance and open learning (Lingham et al., 2015).

Reflecting the broader literature on education in small states, (Crossley et al., 2011) it can be argued that, because these systems were some of the first to prioritise qualitative improvements in education, there is much that the wider international community can learn from their distinctive experience. Similarly, we hope that critical reflections upon our own collaborative research on Pacific teacher education, as presented here, will make a helpful contribution to both the literature on education in small states, and to the broader international literature on cross-cultural research partnerships and capacity building.

In planning the study a level of Pacific-wide scope and impact was envisaged, although an initial phase of fieldwork focussed upon teacher education in Fiji was seen to be more realistic and achievable at the outset. This, it was agreed, would provide a vehicle for team-building, for detailed and collective research design, and for the development of research protocols, instruments and working practices. From the outset, the application of a shared on-line platform was identified as a priority for team building and communication, as a way of sharing material and as a joint working and writing space. This was envisaged as an addition to regular email and Skype communication – and the research proposal itself incorporated a sequence of international workshops, with Pacific team members visiting the UK, and UK members visiting USP at key project milestones. These were scheduled for the start of the 18 month project cycle, during mid-term and at project conclusion.

To maximise the potential of workshop visits the first team meeting was scheduled to coincide with a major international conference held at the University of Bristol on the theme of Living at the Sharp End of Environmental Uncertainty in Small Island States (see <http://www.bristol.ac.uk/cabot/research/casestudies/2014/57.html>). The project lead in Fiji was invited to participate in this conference, and the programme itself was designed to help explore the implications of work on sustainable development and climate change for the future of teacher education in the Pacific. To enhance research impact a project conclusion conference has been planned to be held in collaboration with the Fiji Ministry of Education in Suva during 2016.

Funding for the project was awarded by the British Academy, with matching finance from The University of the South Pacific, and additional support from the Faculty of Arts, Law and Education (FALE) at USP. The two project bids that secured the funding were prepared collaboratively by the core team members in the UK and the Pacific. The UK partners provided leadership in terms of locating the study within the related international literature, while the Pacific partners led in the development of fieldwork plans and conduct. The latter included the incorporation of representative from the Fiji Ministry of Education within the team, research assistants from the two other national universities, namely the Fiji National University (FNU) and the University of Fiji (UniFiji), and the identification and engagement of local Research Assistants (RAs) to help with fieldwork and the analysis of findings. Most pertinently for the present article, one of the three project research questions was purposefully developed to capture critical reflections on the cross-cultural research partnership in practice as below:

To what extent is it possible to construct postcolonial research collaboration that balances capacity development, mutual learning and quality research outputs? This will involve critical reflection upon all elements of the research partnership process leading to methodological and theoretical contributions to the international literature (Project Proposal page 6).

Reflections upon the Research Partnership

In this section we reflect upon the experience of this cross-cultural research partnership in the light of experience to date. The UKFIET Conference will provide an important opportunity for the team to come together to identify and discuss other issues, benefits and challenges, and that, combined with the broader Symposium discussions will help to inform and extend these final two sections of analysis further.

Firstly, however, the Fijian team members in particular feel that the project provides a collaborative learning opportunity for researchers to garner new knowledge about working across the operational cultural contexts within which each institution and scholar primarily engages. At USP, for example, the partnership has enabled mid-career academics to draw from a wide and varied knowledge and experiential base of seasoned scholars with a shared research interest in quality teachers and teaching.

The partnership presents multiple benefits including value-added educational research for USP as an institution. This has also strengthened research relationships between the Schools of Education at USP and the two national universities in Fiji, the Fiji National University and the University of Fiji. The potential for strengthening further research networks through various communities of practice in Fiji and potentially in the 12 member countries of the USP region is recognized as a potentially significant outcome of the undertaking.

In line with the current USP Strategic Plan (USP, 2013 – 2018) which highlights the mission to achieve excellence in teaching and research, this partnership provides a space within which to consider differentials and synergies in education, teacher quality and teaching discourses at the local, Pacific and international/UK levels.

Such an undertaking is not without challenge and some of the emergent issues include limited institutional capacity to provide support due to resource and staffing constraints. For instance, personnel changes and transitional leadership within the USP School of Education resulted in shared leadership responsibilities which impacted heavily on the USP researchers' workloads. Additionally, on-going tensions between the business of teaching and the research priority pose a continual threat to the timely and effective completion of all activities.

Other tensions include managing a diverse team distanced by space and limited by personal and institutional expectations and negotiating different university and Ministry systems in Fiji and the UK. Issues of connectivity and large time difference have also posed a challenge to regular Skype discussions and the primary means of communication has relied heavily on email. Additionally, it has been difficult to identify and use an appropriate online platform to share resources and data. Cross-cultural differences in views on time are an added tension which the team continues to work through. A particularly difficult issue is the cost of international travel between the UK and Fiji. For example, initial plans for the two USP researchers to travel to the UK for this symposium proved to be too costly, resulting in the decision for one researcher to make the journey. Accessing recent international literature has also been difficult from USP, in particular gaining access to Pacific and international publications in print media. While numerous electronic versions of journal articles are available, books and book chapters are less accessible.

Finally at the national level in the Fiji Islands, the education system is currently going through a period of rapid educational reform and this in itself has had an impact on the study. Thus, while the pre-2014 election Ministry of Education had expressed full support and encouraged close engagement in the project, the new Government line up of Ministry of Education staff are now, understandably,

caught up in the business of change management and curriculum reform with less time available than their predecessors.

Sustainable Futures for Pacific Research Partnerships

In this final and concluding section we reflect upon the Pacific – UK research partnership, in the light of the related international literature, to explore ways of strengthening future cross-cultural research partnerships in education and the wider social sciences. While much has been achieved this has not been an easy project for all involved. On the other hand, the challenges experienced have helped greatly in revealing the realities of North – South collaboration in ways that we believe can help to inform improvements for others engaged in such cross cultural work....and to shape improvements that may lead to more successful and sustainable cross cultural research futures.

Firstly our experience suggests that there is much to be learned from such collaborative work but that face to face time is more important than is often recognised. The team is of the view that such research partnerships can work best with shared commitment and this is vital from the outset. Ensuring more efficient and timely completion of deliverables means greater pre-planning in negotiating workloads, in this case particularly for the Fiji Team to allocate realistic numbers of personnel for fieldwork research activity. At key times our experience also suggests that dedicated research leave may be essential for such work in the current professional culture at USP where large and ongoing teaching loads are carried by academics in the School of Education, including all research team members. The establishment of secure and reliable internet services and of a workable and compatible on-line platform for sharing material and developments are essential tools that are not always easy to establish. And at USP major problems have been repeatedly encountered throughout the project. With advances in technology and related staff skills we would, however, anticipate that this will greatly strengthen such initiatives in the future. This section and its implications will also be further developed during UKFIET discussions and in the course of completing the project itself.

In concluding for now, we hope that the experience gained through this USP, Bristol and Nottingham research partnership will be helpful for others working in education and other sectors within the Pacific region, and for those engaged in similar initiatives elsewhere. It is a special opportunity to work together across the globe in ways like this, an opportunity that we have all learned much from, and one that we all, as a team, value greatly.

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