

Building a University Partnership to Support Early Grade Reading in Nigeria: The Case of the Nigeria Centre for Reading, Research and Development

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ABSTRACT

While most international educational development projects are engaged in capacity development, trainings rarely have enough depth to result in lasting changes in the capacity of local stakeholders. The case of the Nigeria Centre for Reading, Research and Development (NCRRD) at Bayero University Kano used a different model. Six NCRRD faculty spent six months at Florida State University (FSU) attending courses on literacy and elementary education, attending grant writing trainings and reading seminars, observing literacy instruction in schools, and participating in conferences. After returning to Nigeria, the fellows were mentored by FSU faculty through the stages of a research project; all fellows subsequently submitted articles to international journals. FSU supported the administrative structures of NCRRD, assisting in the development of financial and compliance infrastructure. The outcomes of the partnership included 1) the establishment of the NCRRD as a center for excellence in reading in West Africa, 2) the publication of contextually relevant literature to inform policymakers and practitioners, and 3) the establishment of graduate programs in reading. This paper discusses the challenges faced by the institutions during the establishment of the NCRRD and makes recommendations for institutions interested in developing long-term international partnerships.

Keywords: capacity development, higher education, literacy, Nigeria, university partnerships

INTRODUCTION

University-to-university partnerships involving institutions in sub-Saharan Africa have the potential to increase the rigor and relevance of research on key development topics, including the teaching of early grade reading. However, this type of research support has largely been left out of large scale, donor-funded education projects. This paper examines the case of the Nigeria Center for Reading, Research and Development (NCRRD), which developed through a USAID-funded collaboration between Florida State University (FSU) and Bayero University Kano (BUK) in Nigeria. This paper will briefly review relevant

literature on international university collaborations in sub-Saharan Africa, describe the NCRRD model, and conclude with recommendations for future capacity development activities in the region.

BACKGROUND AND CONTEXT

To date, much of the international donor aid aimed at higher education capacity development has been devoted to scholarships to study in high-income countries, rather than the development of capacity in context (McCowan, 2016). In recent years, donors have paid greater attention to the sustainability issues associated with this approach, as it often leads to brain drain when highly educated individuals leave their positions for better paying opportunities, often abroad. This approach also ignores the fact that an individual's capacity to conduct research and engage in high quality teaching is related not only to their individual knowledge and skills, but also to the infrastructure of the institution in which they are embedded, which may also need development. These issues of brain drain and the importance of building infrastructure have led to greater interest in university-to-university collaboration as a development approach. For example, USAID has released several funding opportunities in the past two years through the Higher Education for Leadership, Innovation, and Exchange (HELIX) Annual Program Statement.

We use the term “north-south” in this paper to describe collaborations between institutions in high and low- or middle-income countries, in alignment with previous work (e.g., Adriansen & Madsen, 2019; Asare et al., 2020). While many north-south university collaborations have focused on capacity development in health fields (Frantz et al., 2014), projects supporting the development of basic education - for example, through capacity development for faculty at teacher training institutions - have been far less common. As an applied field, education offers many opportunities to combine research, practice, and capacity development in projects that are of interest to faculty at both northern and southern universities. One example of this type of collaboration is the Centre for the Promotion of Literacy in Sub-Saharan Africa (CAPOLSA) at the University of Zambia, a partnership with the University of Jyväskylä in Finland (Serpell, 2014).

University-to-university partnerships can be highly productive but can also be challenging for a variety of reasons, as discussed further below. It is critical for the participating institutions and individuals to agree on a conceptual framework for the partnership from the project's inception. One useful guiding framework for partnership is offered by Wannin et al. (2010), who recommend that partnership participants commit to:

- 1) shared ownership, 2) trust and transparency, 3) understanding of cultural and working environments, 4) clear division of roles/responsibilities, 5) effective and regular communication, 6) joint strategic planning and implementation, 7) strong commitment from staff, 8) supportive institutional infrastructure, 9) monitoring/evaluation, and 10) sustainability (p. 6).

These principles provide a comprehensive structure upon which to build university-to-university partnerships, especially in the context of development projects, with their inherent power imbalances. We will discuss below how several of these principles became key factors in the NCRRD project implementation.

Institutions' Motivations for Pursuing Partnerships

For a collaboration to be considered successful, it is first necessary to understand the motivations for partner institutions to engage in such projects and plan to ensure those aims are met. Globally, the internationalization of higher education has been on an upward trend throughout the past several decades (Altbach & Reisberg, 2018; Rumbley, et al., 2012). Southern institutions are often motivated by desires to

improve the quality and quantity of research produced by their faculty. While Africa's share of academic publications is increasing (Mouton & Blanckenberg, 2018), sub-Saharan African researchers produce less than 1% of research papers, despite the region having more than 13% of the world's population (Fonn et al., 2018). International collaborations may give southern researchers access to new data or methodologies, or they may lead to new perspectives on issues (Grieve & Mitchell, 2020). In a recent review of education research in Sub-Saharan Africa, Mitchell et al. (2020) found that "over one-third of Nigerian articles appear in journals that lack conventional standards of peer review, some containing spelling or grammatical errors in the title" (p. 370). While publishing in international education journals is seen as more prestigious than in local journals, researchers at southern institutions often need mentorship from an academic with experience in international publishing to achieve this goal (Thomas, 2018). After publication, researchers who have collaborators beyond Africa are more likely to be frequently cited (Confraria et al., 2018). Southern institutions may also be motivated to develop their capacity to obtain and manage external research funding from foundations, non-profit organizations, and national and foreign governments.

Northern institutions generally have a different set of motivations for engaging in north-south partnerships. Collaborations may be driven by individual faculty members' interests, an institutional desire to be known as a leader in a specific development-related field, or the ability to access development funding for research activities. More broadly, international partnerships can enrich northern universities' academic programs at home by promoting intercultural and global citizenship skills for domestic students (Maringe & Foskett, 2010; Mock et al., 2016). For example, students at the northern university may benefit from research internships related to the collaboration that develop valuable cross-cultural communication skills. As a result of these motivations, many U.S. institutions have maintained or increased their financial commitments to internationalization, even during budget cutbacks (Blessinger & Cozza, 2017). While the motivations of the northern and southern universities likely differ, thoughtfully designed university-to-university collaborations can meet both sets of institutional goals.

Challenges to Developing Equitable Partnerships

Development projects bring an inherent power imbalance, and university-to-university collaborations in the sector are no exception. Previous university collaborations in various fields have often been unbalanced in terms of decision-making power (Adriansen & Madsen, 2019; Asare et al., 2020; Craveiro et al., 2020; Walsh et al., 2016), with northern faculty generally serving as first author on publications, for example (Gonzalez-Alcaide et al., 2020). Financial control generally stays with the northern partners, an issue that causes frustration at southern partner institutions (Dean et al., 2015). These funding patterns, in which development funds are awarded to the northern institution, which then subcontracts to the southern institution, are often attributable to perceived institutional weakness regarding the financial management of external funding at southern institutions, or at a minimum, lack of an established track record on funds management.

Power dynamics can also be visible in decision making processes around collaborative research projects. The research priorities of northern and southern academics may not match, and the leverage of funding may mean that the northern academics control what is studied and how. Local politics regarding topics can also be challenging and not well understood by foreign researchers, causing stress in relationships (Grieve & Mitchell, 2020). These patterns can be seen as the legacies of colonialism in some African countries (Adriansen & Madsen, 2019; Mitchell et al., 2020).

An additional challenge in the development of north-south university collaborations is ensuring gender equity, which is often a key priority for development funders. International collaborations are more likely to involve male academics in Africa, reflecting the relatively low percentages of female faculty (Asare et al., 2020). More broadly, there are relatively few female research leaders in sub-Saharan Africa (Owusu et al., 2017), which may be partly due to their low rates of participation in early- and mid-career capacity development projects. The lack of role models in academic research for young women likely impacts the career decisions of female university students in African universities. Differences in cultural gender norms across partner institutions may be challenging, but a successful capacity development project should be inclusive—not only of women, but of individuals with disabilities and other groups that are disadvantaged in specific contexts, including racial, ethnic, and religious groups.

Local Context: Nigeria and Bayero University Kano

Nigeria is a major recipient of donor funding related to educational access and quality in primary grades.¹ However, as of 2017, relatively little attention had been paid to creating a local base of reading research experts with the skills to conduct rigorous research to support ongoing initiatives. While a critical analysis of reading research from Nigeria has not, to our knowledge, been done, a recent analysis of reading research from South Africa identified a number of weaknesses in published studies, including a lack of methodological rigor and poor analysis of findings (Biesman-Simons et al., 2020). This lack of rigor in education research means that interventions often draw on literature produced by northern researchers using samples of children in northern countries. The lack of high quality, locally relevant research is a constraint to the improvement of reading instruction and outcomes in Nigeria, as well as other low and middle-income countries. Additionally, teacher training systems in Nigeria have remained weak (Barnes et al., 2019), as interventions focus on in-service teacher training for more immediate results.

The concept of the NCRRD emerged from the Northern Education Initiative (NEI) Plus activity (2015-2020), a USAID-funded project that built upon the prior Northern Education Initiative to increase access to quality basic education and improve early grade reading skills. NEI Plus was implemented by Creative Associates International in collaboration with three U.S. organizations and four local organizations.² Noting the systemic gaps in the areas of research production and pre-service teacher training, USAID's education officers in Abuja facilitated the development of a partnership between Bayero University Kano (BUK) and Florida State University to create the NCRRD.

Bayero University Kano (1975) was the first university in Kano, Nigeria's most populous state and second-largest city. BUK currently has nearly 50,000 undergraduate and graduate students and 4,518 staff, including 1,575 academic staff. The Faculty of Education's six departments offer a wide range of degree programs, including general education, adult education, special education, science and technology education, and counseling. BUK's Directorate of Research Innovation and Partnership had previous experience supporting external grant funding to the university's Centre for Dryland Agriculture.

¹ Major donors include the World Bank, USAID, the Global Partnership for Education (GPE), UNICEF, and the U.K. Department for International Development (DFID; now the Foreign, Commonwealth & Development Office [FCDO]).

² Partner organizations included Education Development Center (EDC), Florida State University (FSU), Overseas Strategic Consulting (OSC), Value Minds, Civil Society Action Coalition on Education for All (CSACEFA), the Reading Association of Nigeria (RAN), and the Federation of Muslim Women's Associations in Nigeria (FOMWAN).

Importantly, BUK was prepared to commit faculty time and resources to the new center, and to continue to fund the center after the USAID collaboration funding ended.

At the beginning of discussions regarding the NCRRD, FSU was already engaged in multiple research and development projects in Nigeria, including NEI Plus. Moreover, FSU faculty had existing relationships, experience working in the region, and years of experience working on early grade reading projects in sub-Saharan Africa. With more than 50 years of experience with international university-to-university collaborations, FSU's administration and grants management systems were prepared to not only manage the project, but to mentor BUK's administration through the project. As a large state university and pre-service teacher training institution, FSU had many similarities with BUK regarding its aims for its academic programs, including the development of new teachers who were prepared to teach reading using evidence-backed pedagogies, thereby ensuring that all children learned to read. In short, FSU was a good fit for this collaboration.

THE NCRRD MODEL

The collaboration between FSU and BUK to create the NCRRD had five main components: 1) a graduate literacy course, 2) residencies at FSU, 3) support in building a resource library, 4) assistance in developing new courses and degree programs on literacy, and 5) research mentorship. These activities were implemented from 2017 through 2020.

Individual-level capacity development began in October 2017, when FSU faculty traveled to BUK to deliver a graduate level course on early grade reading to the faculty fellows. This course provided the faculty fellows (who would later attend FSU for extended residencies) a foundation in the current evidence base on early grade reading. The course was delivered in several multi-day sessions, ending in December 2017. During this course, FSU faculty supported NCRRD faculty in writing research papers related to their areas of interest, which were later developed into an edited book, as discussed further below. Fellows who completed all course activities successfully received certificates of completion.

To provide in-depth training on the science of reading and research methodologies, six faculty fellows from BUK came to FSU for six-month residencies. During the residencies, fellows completed coursework in three areas: 1) early grade reading, 2) research methods, and 3) international and multicultural education. Each fellow audited four or five courses. In addition to coursework, fellows visited local primary schools to observe reading instruction and meet with school administrators. All fellows attended one national- or international-level conference, including the Comparative and International Education Society, the International Literacy Association, and the Literacy Research Association; some of the fellows presented their work at these conferences. Attendance at the conferences allowed the fellows to build their professional networks and exposed them to current research in the field of early grade reading.

During their residencies, each fellow was matched with an FSU professor as a research mentor. The mentors had extensive research and publication experience. Mentors helped fellows to develop a research question, design studies, and develop data collection tools. Upon their returns to BUK, fellows collected and analyzed data, then wrote a journal article for publication in partnership with their mentors. These publications and presentations helped to establish the credibility and expertise of the NCRRD fellows in the field of early grade reading, both within Nigeria and internationally. These mentorships have continued beyond the formal end of the project (June 2020) with the development of new empirical projects.

To further establish the NCRRD as a center of excellence in early grade reading, the project purchased books and other print materials for the NCRRD library; these books were unavailable in Nigeria

and have become an invaluable reference for researchers and graduate students in the region. In addition, FSU provided - and continues to provide - the NCRRD fellows with free access to thousands of journal titles through its subscriptions to journal databases. This will allow NCRRD faculty to stay up to date on developments in early grade reading globally and to conduct new research. The materials available in the library were further bolstered by textbooks, articles, and other materials brought to BUK by the fellows after completing their residencies, as well as by new computers and other technology purchased by BUK.

The NCRRD has also engaged in national-level curriculum development work and the development of new academic programs to promote sustainability in line with the project's objectives and the principles for successful partnerships (Wanni et al., 2010). The NCRRD has designed - and proposed to the National Universities Commission - the incorporation of reading components into the curricula of language-learning-based programs at the undergraduate and postgraduate levels in all Nigerian universities. Additionally, the NCRRD has designed two new programs at BUK focusing on early grade reading, in collaboration with the BUK Faculty of Education and the School of Continuing Education. These programs are currently awaiting the approval of the Academic Development Committee and the University Senate and are expected to commence at the beginning of the 2021 academic year. The NCRRD will promote and support specialization in reading at both the master's and PhD degree levels within Faculty of Education degree programs.

NCRRD PROJECT OUTCOMES

The central goal of the NCRRD project was to establish a center for early grade reading research and training to serve Nigeria and West Africa. This was successful, and the NCRRD is now open and operating. As a sign of its ongoing commitment to the NCRRD, the Nigerian Government has approved, in their 2020 national budget, the construction of dedicated buildings with the required facilities for the NCRRD. It is expected that the work shall be completed in 2021. Upon full approval of its new academic programs, the NCRRD will have a direct impact on the teaching of early grade reading in Nigeria.

An important aim of the project was to establish the centre's reputation as a producer and disseminator of research. One means of doing this was through the commencement of the Annual National Conference on Children's Books and the Teaching of Early Grade Reading in Nigeria, the first of which was held in September 2019 and the second in March 2020. Stakeholders and researchers from across Nigeria attended, including representatives of State Universal Education Boards, universities, teacher colleges, publishers, community-based and international nongovernmental organizations, and donor agencies. The high attendance at these two conferences - more than 800 attendees each - demonstrates the interest in early grade reading in Nigeria, as well as the capacity of the NCRRD to serve as a convener in this field. The conferences provided networking opportunities and helped build stakeholder relationships. The NCRRD has also concluded plans to commence the publication of the bi-annual journal, the *Nigerian Journal of Reading*, later this year.

Dissemination of research in international-level journals is a critical element of being perceived as an international center of excellence. As a result of this project, as of early 2021, five peer-reviewed journal articles have been submitted and 12 conference presentations made, including at the Comparative and International Education Society and the African Studies Association. All empirical papers have been first authored by the NCRRD faculty fellows, with support from FSU co-authors. This reflects the leadership and control that the NCRRD fellows had over their projects. They were matched to FSU mentors with expertise on their specific topics; this may have reduced some of the conflict identified in previous studies

regarding control over the research agenda (Gonzalez-Alcaide et al., 2020; Grieve & Mitchell, 2020). Journal articles focused on a variety of topics related to EGR in Nigeria, including the challenges of teaching large classes (Adamu et al., 2020), reading comprehension instruction, gender representations in Nigerian reading textbooks, and how parents supported their children's literacy development at home during COVID-19 school closures.

Additionally, the project produced an edited book, which reviewed international evidence on EGR and contextualized it for application in Nigerian classrooms and teacher training colleges (Tsigas et al., 2020). With the support of the Nigerian government, 3,000 copies of the edited book have been distributed to stakeholders across the country.

The NCRRD has already influenced policy and practice in several ways concerning early grade reading in Nigeria. The Director of the NCRRD has contributed to the development of the National Reading Framework for Nigeria through participation in its Technical Working Group. NCRRD faculty have consulted and collaborated with various programs and program implementers working in Nigeria, including USAID's Northern Education Initiative Plus, the Reading and Numeracy Activity (RANA), Jolly Phonics, the British Council, UNICEF, and RTI International. They have also collaborated with other colleges and universities in Nigeria. Recently, NCRRD faculty supported the University of Maiduguri in developing new diploma programs in Early Grade Reading and Conflict Based Education, through a separate USAID activity. The NCRRD faculty's local knowledge and expertise in early grade reading will help ongoing and new education projects to be both rigorously designed and contextually appropriate.

In sum, the NCRRD has become a convener in the area of early grade reading in Nigeria in a short period of time. It has spread evidence-based knowledge and practices to stakeholders across the country, such as faculty at teacher training colleges, who might otherwise not have had access to this information. The NCRRD has demonstrated its capacity to work with both local and international partners to improve the teaching of reading in Nigeria, and is actively working to secure additional funding, both independently and in collaboration with FSU.

IMPLICATIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

The experiences of the FSU, BUK, and USAID teams during the largely successful development of the NCRRD lead to the following set of recommendations for future projects, in Nigeria and elsewhere. First, the full commitment of both higher education institutions, as well as the support of USAID Nigeria's education team, was critical. This commitment helped in smoothing out administrative challenges, such as assignments of faculty to various activities. The full commitment by BUK, as evidenced by their assignment of faculty fellows from several academic departments to the NCRRD, also points to the sustainability of the Centre. BUK's former Vice Chancellor, Professor Muhammad Yahuza Bello, during whose tenure the NCRRD commenced, was a champion of the project throughout, supporting its activities financially and administratively. The Deputy Vice Chancellor in charge of academic matters at the time, Professor Sagir A. Abbas, is now the Vice Chancellor, and he pledges similar support for the center. Having champions in senior leadership roles at the university is highly beneficial in a capacity development project like the NCRRD.

Second, this project was successful because there were two-way benefits, both for the institutions and for the individuals involved. The NCRRD project was relevant to both institutions' goals to increase internationalization, as well as to increase research funding and output. Faculty participants benefitted individually as well, with the production of journal articles and other research products that were valued

for merit evaluations and internal advancement. More specifically, BUK faculty were supported in designing rigorous research, learning analytic methods for use in empirical research, and writing for international audiences. FSU faculty were able to engage in research that they could not have completed on their own, as outsiders to the context. These research relationships have continued into new projects, due to the benefits they bring to all parties.

Third, this project is distinguished from many previous higher education capacity development projects because it was designed to provide both breadth and depth of capacity development. Previous approaches have often focused either on long-term investments in individuals - for example, through funding doctoral programs for faculty from low- and middle-income countries at universities in high-income countries - or shorter-term, broader training with larger numbers of faculty on site in their home countries. The NCRRD development project did both, and this combination was effective for both quality of outputs and sustainability. The six-month residencies with ongoing research mentorship provided the content and methodological depth necessary to develop a center of excellence. The residencies were not degree programs; the courses were audited rather than taken for credit, allowing ample time for research, writing, listening, and interaction to expand skills and experiences. This depth of experience among the six BUK faculty was then embedded as the core of the NCRRD, and additional activities, such as curriculum development and conferences, involved the larger group of NCRRD-affiliated faculty at BUK. This combination of breadth and depth in capacity development should reduce or avoid problems faced by previous approaches, such as brain drain caused when one or two core individuals leave an institution - or when a broad, shallow training proves to be inadequate to develop local research leaders.

The major challenges were situated outside of the immediate implementation team. A sustainable research center requires infrastructure beyond the researchers themselves, such as grants managers, proposal support, and administrative assistants (Gomo, 2011; Grieve & Mitchell, 2020). Some of this support existed at BUK, but, as the project progressed, the team saw the need to provide more training and support on the administrative components of the NCRRD. At other institutions, it could be necessary to build this infrastructure from the ground up. Steps that are routine for U.S.-based institutions, such as obtaining Dun & Bradstreet's Data Universal Numbering System (DUNS) and System for Award Management (SAMS) numbers, which are required to receive U.S. government funds, can be daunting for institutions in low- and middle-income countries that are new to the process of registering to obtain this funding.

Beyond the university, the project also encountered challenges related to slow government approval of new courses and content on early grade reading for undergraduate and graduate programs in Nigeria. The NCRRD developed these materials early in the project; however, due to the shutdown of government activities necessitated by the COVID-19 pandemic, final approval had not yet been received from the National Universities Commission and National Commission for Colleges of Education. When approved, these courses will mark a key area of impact for the NCRRD in teacher training for national early grade literacy.

CONCLUSION

The NCRRD project was successful in developing a new university research center that is supporting new academic programs and producing rigorous, context-relevant research. We believe that this has been due to the team's joint commitment to the ten principles discussed by Wannan et al. (2010). In particular, trust, communication, and joint planning were critical. This aligns with research from other

contexts pointing to the importance of relationships in university-to-university collaborations (Larsen & Tascon, 2020). Additionally, we encourage those who are planning collaborations to pay the necessary attention to institutional infrastructure, monitoring, and evaluation. For collaborations to be sustainable, capacity development needs to occur not with individual faculty, but with a broader group, including financial and administrative support staff. Engaging in both deep and broad capacity development across the necessary range of skills and competencies will lead to more sustainable and productive research centers.

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