



Capacity-building for equitable global health research from Africa: the power of two

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Received: 28 September 2015 / Accepted: 14 December 2015 / Published online: 22 December 2015
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The editorial “Productive global health research from Africa: it takes more” (Waiswa 2015) is an important awakening for global health professionals to the challenges for carrying out effective research in Africa.

Our experience is from a twinning partnership for capacity-building for global health research through a Ph.D. at the University of Rwanda and Aarhus University in Denmark (Schriver et al. 2015). We adopted a twinning model based in Rwanda linking a Ph.D. student from each country.

In our case, practical and administrative challenges raised in the editorial were facilitated through the twinning model. For example, when applying for diploma recognition for the Rwandan twin from the Danish Ministry of Higher Education and Science, a busy supervisor might have given up at first rejection. The interdependency of the linked Ph.D. students gave a strong mutual interest in helping each other navigate the bureaucracy. This is helpful where understanding language, culture and other contextual issues can be essential for progress. Twinning for research entails continuous creative exchange and mutual support, beneficial both in establishing and sharing strategic networks, ensuring safe and effective working conditions and preparing sound, team-based research. Such collaboration may also break the solitude of individual Ph.D. students as well as build the readiness for creating and working in research groups.

In obtaining visa, both universities played a crucial role for the Ph.D. twins. We suggest academic institutions engage in constructive dialogues with governments through their consular services to further facilitate timely processing of visa applications.

The editorial describes funding of individual candidates as a barrier for raising innovative research capacity. We suggest this barrier rather be due to the organisation around the Ph.D. than the funding model itself. Individually funded Ph.D. students in Africa enrolled at a foreign University and strongly anchored within their local University are more likely to build local research capacity. Developing research infrastructure often begins with individuals in strong local networks. For instance, contribution to local faculty development around research could be amongst the tasks.

The Twin Ph.D. model is of relatively low cost whilst yielding synergetic benefits. Close collaboration and flexible funding models further improve the match between local needs and sponsor interests.

Nurturing institutional and individual links may improve conditions for subsequent postdoctoral training. It is important to maintain advantages in place for the Ph.D. student, such as office and internet access, and journal access locally and abroad.

There is a fine balance when advocating for retention of workload at the home institution and therefore demanding additional tasks of Ph.D. students. Anecdotally, Ph.D. students enrolled in a European university on a project in their home country in Africa progress less effectively whilst at home as when in Europe. Reasons include competing tasks back home—teaching, meetings and other academic and research tasks often in less optimal environment, distracted by inescapable social and family (and extended African family) pressures. In a related article by

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Sewankambo et al. (2015), candidates in one of the collaborative Ph.D. approaches were still able to deliver on their educational workload. Strong support systems have to be in place at departmental and higher levels to facilitate candidates in achieving this.

Whereas long-term, financial and academic partnerships between Universities are undoubtedly important, they are often strategically committed on certain research fields and may be costly due to requirements for large over-heads and general institutional funding. We see a complementary role for flexible MoUs allowing exploration of benefits for individual or partnering Ph.D. students who may raise funds for additional projects. All collaboration models should support local investments for research and institutional development, in turn producing knowledge to guide decisions and development at a national level.

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