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Straight talk: Top tips for international collaboration

Phil Ward, deputy director of research services at the University of Kent and a Funding Insight columnist, passes on advice from an evangelist dedicated to international working.

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There's never been a more important time to hear from academics with overseas experience. At a time when it feels as if many countries—including the UK—are becoming more isolationist and inward looking, it pays to reflect on what they have to say.

Ian McLoughlin, head of computing at the University of Kent's Medway campus, is one example, "I spent 18 years working abroad," he said, when he spoke to [the Global Challenges and Newton Fund workshop](#) at the university recently, "and it was the highlight of my career." He is evangelical about the benefit and worth of collaborating internationally.

McLoughlin's time abroad was predominantly spent in Asia, with a decade in Singapore, five years in New Zealand, and three in China, and a range of short-term projects in Cambodia, India, Malaysia, Pakistan, Papua New Guinea and Vietnam.

It not only raised his profile, increased his citations and gave him access to funding that wouldn't be possible without international collaboration, but it gave him the opportunity to understand different cultures, as well as a different way of looking at issues. This "altered perspective" has proved to be invaluable for him in providing the objectivity and distance necessary for excellent research.

McLoughlin gave other details of the two-way benefits of collaboration. As a native English speaker, you might be able to offer help in writing papers as well as assisting your international collaborators in increasing the reach and range of their publications. Their experience might similarly help to raise your profile, or they could act as a partner in grant applications, improving a project's impact and giving access to research support and future PhD students.

Moreover, a collaboration will allow both parties the opportunity to move beyond the familiar, to try something neither of you would normally try, and thus be intellectually stimulated. More practically, you can both help each other with teaching, guest lecturing and accessing resources.

For those interested in exploring international collaboration further, McLoughlin was both encouraging and cautious. “You need to go into it with your eyes open,” he said, “and realise that your collaborator has as many pressures and time constraints as you do.” He offered 10 top tips to bear in mind when seeking out a collaborator.

1. Start small, as they have as little spare time as you do

Starting an international collaboration is a considerable undertaking for both partners. Both of you are exploring links that have considerable potential, but take a lot of work and time to develop. It is therefore worth starting small. You don't have to collaborate on, say, a global challenge immediately. Rather, consider joint authorship on a paper, a joint conference session, or a short exchange.

2. Know the set of things that they need and you could potentially deliver

Like any relationship, you need to be aware of what you can offer, and what is important to you. Think about the needs of your project (see below), and consider who (or which group) can help to meet that need.

3. List your must haves, nice to haves and definitely nots

There is no point working with people if the relationship doesn't meet your needs, but think about what those needs are, and which of them are essential.

4. Find someone you feel comfortable working with rather than the best in the field

Further to this, be aware that you are getting into a long-term relationship, so the potential colleague needs to not only meet your research needs, but be someone who you can work with on a personal level.

5. Be flexible, never judgmental

Inevitably, you will need to give and take, and the cultural expectations of your collaborator may be very different. Don't be inflexible: be willing to take on board their issues or concerns. You might not be able to meet them all, but giving due consideration with an open mind is crucial.

6. You don't have to meet in person, but it helps

It's tempting, in our pressured and time-poor world, to rely on the phone, email, and Skype, but nothing beats a personal meeting. Misunderstandings can be clarified, and a more personal bond can be forged between the partners.

7. Understand your differing cultural (and religious) norms

I've alluded to this already, but it bears repeating. Particularly outside of the global north, expectations, priorities and beliefs vary hugely, and you need to be sensitive to them. This is a partnership of equals, and your collaborator should be treated as such.

8. Understand the universal principles of reciprocity, and valuation

Following on from this, you should not do all of the taking. You need to value and respect your collaborator's work, and the pressures in their life. Offer help and support when it's needed, if you expect them to do the same for you.

9. Be prepared to carry any collaboration, at least for a while

The ideal collaboration may take a while to form, so be open and adaptable as it coalesces. You may need to do more than your fair share initially if you want it to work, but the effort will be worth it, if it means the collaboration will be stronger as a result.

10. When they are busy you might be free, when you are busy they might be free: look at this as an opportunity

McLoughlin made clear that collaborators' work schedules often differ from yours. If you wait until both are free then this is a disadvantage, because it probably means 'never'. However you can turn this into an advantage if you keep moving forwards when you are free (but they are busy) and in return they move forwards when they are free (but you are busy). That way you can build and maintain good momentum.

Throughout the collaboration, flexibility, understanding, and a healthy attitude of respect are essential. However, you need to go into any joint project with a full knowledge of your needs and what you hope to get out of it. The journey to fulfilling these may be circuitous and unexpected, but the golden rule is that if you keep the best interests of your collaborator in mind, the collaboration will work and will provide a huge amount of additional benefit besides.

- 15 Dec 16, 10:00
- By Phil Ward

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