



EdQual

A Research Programme Consortium on
Implementing Education Quality in Low Income Countries

Research Capacity Building: Learning from the EdQual RPC

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The Research Programme Consortium model creates new opportunities and new challenges

The case of EdQual demonstrates how large research consortia can create new opportunities for Southern research engagement and leadership, that this helps to ensure research meets Southern knowledge needs, and that capacity building is integral to research processes.

The EdQual Research Programme Consortium (RPC), funded by the UK Department for International Development (DFID), is an example of an international research consortium conducting largely qualitative social research related to international development. Developing research capacity in sub-Saharan Africa (SSA) is one of its central objectives.

The RPC model for funding research is intended to enhance relevance for policy and to strengthen research capacity in the South (DFID 2008a). This policy brief highlights how EdQual created opportunities for and encountered challenges in realising these expectations. Partners in the UK and SSA participated in research conceptualisation, design and management at the programme level. Research leadership was decentralised, so that each African partner led one international large scale project. This created a sense of shared ownership and meant that research projects focused on national policy in the South, while engaging with the priorities of the Northern funder.

Capacity building was integral to all process elements of the RPC, as the skills of research leadership were developed in both the North and South through practice in doing research. EdQual also funded a large number of studentships, which were taken up in universities in the UK and SSA. These were nearly all awarded to academic staff at partner institutions in SSA. Institutional research capacity building contributed directly to the strengthening of teaching programmes that train practitioners and hence enhanced take-up.

Key Messages

Research capacity building needs to be understood as mutual, benefiting both Northern and Southern partners.

Research capacity includes the ability to adapt research approaches and methods to local and national contexts. It can be developed through participation in research leadership.

Research studentships are an important component of institutional capacity building.

Research capacity building can help to strengthen teaching and training programmes.

EdQual RPC and education quality

EdQual's research focuses on how to improve the quality of basic education. Education quality is key to attracting and retaining learners in basic education and ensuring education contributes to other areas of development.

Research findings at a glance

The RPC model created new opportunities for...

- African ownership
- Building competent research teams with experienced and skilled leadership
- South-South collaboration and international networks
- Shared agenda-setting and decision-making at programme level
- Building capacity through doing, leading and collaborating in research
- Strengthening teaching and training programmes related to research
- Targeting PhD studentships in priority areas and on individuals who play key roles in their institutions

The RPC model created new challenges for...

- Leadership roles and capacity building discourse
- Distributed leadership in the context of centralised structures of accountability to the funder
- Distributed leadership in the context of current individual and institutional incentives
- Meeting the knowledge needs of Southern governments and Northern funders
- Balancing process and product goals, whilst meeting deadlines for deliverables
- Managing a complex research partnerships alongside teaching and other academic roles
- RPC modalities and the need to support research in a wide range of institutions and contexts

Research Capacity Building and DFID's RPCs

Capacity building for research uptake

During the 1990s in the UK, much social research was criticised for lacking clarity and cumulative authority, and for not being cost-effective and accessible enough (Tooley with Darby 1999). This led to the promotion of collaborative

research networks designed to strengthen overall capacity and critical mass (Menter & Murray 2009).

DFID associated strengthened research capacity with improved uptake

In the development arena, bilateral agencies, including DFID, associated strengthened research capacity with the improved uptake and application of research (Hovland 2003). DFID's decision to fund RPCs was, in part, a response to a recommendation for "a much greater focus

on larger, more strategic, longer-term problem-focussed research initiatives around key priority themes" (Surr et al. 2002: 40). DFID views the RPCs as a way to:

- Fund large, inter-disciplinary bodies of knowledge, with flexibility to respond to new research priorities;
- Manage the resources of a broad group of research stakeholders (including civil society groups and knowledge intermediaries);
- Develop capability to do research through supporting individual researchers to build their skills and progress their careers and also by helping institutions plan for the long-term (paraphrased from DFID 2008a: 40).

It has been observed that the resources spent on capacity issues vary enormously between RPCs. The figures for those working mainly in Africa, where the "capacity problem is more profound", tend to be higher (DFID 2008b: 8).

Meanings of research capacity

DFID defines research capacity as: "the ability of individuals, organisations and systems to undertake and disseminate high quality research effectively and efficiently" (DFID 2008b: 3). High quality must not just mean research that is internationally recognised as rigorous, but also that the research addresses local and national knowledge needs and recognises local ways of knowing (Crossley & Holmes 2001; Samoff 2009).

High quality research addresses local knowledge needs and recognises local ways of knowing



Dame Pearlette Louisy (2001: 435), Governor General of St. Lucia, argues for "national or institutional capacity to undertake the type of research ... necessary to 'customise' the experiences of others."

This presents a real challenge. There is a strand of literature that criticises the rhetorical deployment of terms such as 'capacity building', 'partnership' and 'ownership' to subtly control research agendas (McGrath 2001; Samoff 2009).

The working paper on capacity building resulting from consultation on DFID's Research

Strategy commented that: "Practical progress depends on acknowledgment and understanding the power

relationships" (DFID 2008b: 14). It calls for the recognition of "mutual capacity gaps" (ibid.), saying that

Southern institutions comment on capacity gaps of northern partners and/

or donors that prevent them from working cooperatively towards common development goals. The working paper also advises being "mindful of the importance of Southern leadership" (ibid.: 16).

Capacity gaps of northern partners and donors prevent them from working cooperatively

Shared ownership

Two funding agencies have identified principles for successful international research partnerships (KFPE 1998; Africa Unit 2010). These principles relate to: shared ownership, including deciding objectives together; mutual trust; transparency; and the sharing of information, responsibility and the benefits of research.

Also prioritised are increasing research capacity and sustainability.

About EdQual

EdQual is short for 'Implementing Education Quality in Low Income Countries'. The RPC is mainly concerned with improving teaching, learning and leadership processes in primary and secondary schools in sub-Saharan Africa.

The consortium brings together four higher education institutions (HEIs) in sub-Saharan Africa and two in the UK. Most of EdQual's research projects use action research to work closely with teachers to develop strategies for improving education quality that work in their own contexts.

Research leadership is distributed, with four out of five of EdQual's large scale projects being led by an African institution. Most of the research projects are international, comparing across two or more countries.

Capacity building of partner institutions, particularly the African HEIs, is an important programme objective. Towards this end, the RPC has an associate partner institution in South Asia and one in Latin America who provide expertise in particular substantive and methodological areas.

For more information on EdQual visit www.edqual.org

Learning from the EdQual experience

Capacity Building

Researchers and administrators involved in EdQual identified three forms of capacity building:

1. Doctoral studentships

EdQual funded ten PhD studentships, three of which were taken up at African universities. All students spent at least one year in their home institution during the course of their doctorate, when many contributed to teaching. Six students also contributed to research or administration of the EdQual projects in their home countries, four playing a leading role. All the students have already returned to their home institution or plan to do so within the next year. The long periods of study leave have stretched academic staffing in two of the African partner institutions. However, all partners welcomed the studentships as sustainable contributions to institutional and systemic capacity. Doctoral training provides individuals, and hence their institutions, with the skills to autonomously conceptualise and design research, and so addresses a key capacity gap (see below).

2. Training teams

Training in research design and methods was delivered to research project teams through task-oriented workshops designed to support implementation of the research projects. The two Southern associate partners made key

contributions to facilitating these workshops in Rwanda and Tanzania. The workshops, together with the actual experience of doing research in collaboration with researchers from other countries, developed a critical mass of individuals with expertise in a particular substantive area and methodological approach (see box below). Research leaders gained skills and confidence through the actual practice of leading a research project, whilst being able to collaborate and consult with experienced colleagues in other countries, particularly on conceptual and methodological issues.

3. Professional learning and networks

All researchers and administrators, both in the UK and Africa, developed professional networks and insights through working closely with colleagues in other countries over an extended period of time. Researchers benefited from exploring familiar educational issues in unfamiliar contexts and learnt from observing and sharing perspectives on education issues with colleagues living and working in other contexts.

Looking outside the RPCs

We cannot comment on the effect of concentrating funding in the RPCs on research capacity in institutions which were not part of an RPC, both in the UK and in the South. We recommend this dimension is included in future evaluations of the RPC model.

Distributed Leadership

The RPC model created new opportunities for Southern research leadership but also created new challenges. The distribution of research leadership within EdQual meant that that leadership in both the UK and Africa was always in some way incomplete or 'deferred'. African researchers did design and manage the projects they were leading. However, they were constrained by a research agenda specified at the programme level.

Leadership was always in some way incomplete or 'deferred'

Researchers from each partner institution contributed to research design and conceptualisation at the programme level. However, the lead institution in the UK was the hub of activity for proposal writing, and when decisions had to be made quickly it was not always possible to consult widely, especially with colleagues in locations with poor communications infrastructure.

Research design was an area where EdQual encountered a capacity gap in the South that was addressed through a series of proposal-writing workshops. Leadership skills related to research design needed strengthening—and hence were incomplete.

Southern leadership was also deferred by being one step removed from accountability to the funder, as all reporting, financial and otherwise, was routed through the lead institution in the UK. On the other hand, the leadership of the UK-based director was similarly deferred or de-centred, as he became contractually accountable for research projects that he was not directly managing.

Research uptake at Kigali Institute of Education



Kigali Institute of Education (KIE) led the 'Use of ICTs in basic education' project, which conducted action research with mathematics and science school teachers (EdQual 2010).

Through workshops and observation and discussion of classroom practices, primary and secondary school teachers working with academics experimented with ICTs. Together they devised ways to incorporate newly-introduced technologies into classroom teaching and learning (Uworwabayeho 2009; Karangwa et al. 2010). At the same time, the project developed video resources for teachers demonstrating the use of ICTs. Academics involved in the project were teacher educators at KIE, supported by researchers from the UK and Chile, where computers have been used in schools for some time. KIE is the main institution in Rwanda for training secondary school teachers.

The 'Use of ICTs' project has left a critical mass of KIE staff with the skills and resources for training teachers to use ICTs to make teaching and learning more interactive. This means that in future both in-service and pre-service programmes at KIE will include training in use of ICT in teaching and learning in mathematics and science.

About the Research

One of the principles underlying EdQual's approach to research is to be "self reflexive and self critical concerning our own role as education researchers interested in Africa" (Tikly and Barrett 2007, 7). Towards this end, the authors of this policy brief conducted a small scale study on partnership and capacity building within EdQual (Barrett et al, forthcoming). This consisted of four main research activities:

1. Conducting a literature review on partnership and capacity building in international research collaborations;
2. Collecting, in late 2009, and analysing, narratives from 14 individuals involved with EdQual, including the Director, researchers based in Africa and the UK, doctoral researchers and administrators. Informants commented on: bid writing and designing projects; challenges and benefits of partnership within EdQual at the individual and institutional level; and the likely legacy of the EdQual RPC at the institutional and national level. The length of informants' involvement with EdQual ranged from 18 months to up to five years;
3. Revisiting and analysing data generated by two 'reflections' workshops held in September 2008 and September 2009. The workshops involved researchers and administrators, and their purpose was to critically and cooperatively reflect on EdQual's management and research processes (Barrett et al 2008); and
4. Reviewing key programme documents generated throughout the lifetime of EdQual, such as the original invitation to tender and full RPC proposal, annual reports and outputs from the mid-term review in 2007.

Further Reading

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EdQual is a consortium of six higher education institutions in the UK and Africa funded by the UK Department for International Development (DFID) to carry out a five year (2005-2010) programme of research on education quality mainly in low income countries, focusing on sub-Saharan Africa.

EdQual partner institutions are:
 University of Bristol, UK (lead)
 University of Bath, UK
 University of Cape Coast, Ghana
 University of Dar es Salaam, Tanzania
 Kigali Institute of Education, Rwanda
 University of the Witwatersrand, South Africa