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EDITORIAL

Five Lessons from Two Decades of International Academic Collaboration

As challenges to public health grow increasingly complex, the role of international academic partnerships becomes ever more important. From pandemics to mental illness and maternal and child health, from occupational hazards to antimicrobial resistance, from health manpower migration to health system change, these shared challenges transcend borders - and so must the solutions. After two decades of collaboration between institutions in South Asia and North America, five key lessons emerge that may guide others in building effective, equitable, and sustainable partnerships in health research and education.

1. Relationships Before Projects: Trust is the True Infrastructure

While funding, laboratories, access to research subjects, and governance structures matter, the most resilient and productive partnerships are based on personal and professional trust. Long-term academic linkages flourish when anchored in shared respect, regular exchange, and mutual learning.

Early support from senior leadership is essential for launching joint work. But over time, it is the strength of individual collaborations between students, faculty members, and administrators that ensure continuity - especially during crises. Shared authorship, co-mentorship, and joint decision-making can help establish a culture of mutual benefit. Institutional champions are key, as are the often-overlooked staff managing the logistics of research, travel, administration and education. These human relationships are the glue when political instability, natural disasters, or pandemics put partnerships to the test.

2. Start Small, But Build with Intent

International academic partnerships often begin modestly a shared student project, a pilot grant, a faculty or student exchange. Yet when approached with clear intent and flexibility, such small beginnings can evolve into larger, ongoing institutional relationships.

Our model for Sri Lanka – US collaboration began with funds initially raised for post-tsunami relief. Instead of being used for short-term emergency aid, these resources were redirected toward seeding an enduring academic exchange. What started with a narrow clinical focus later grew into a broad interdisciplinary network involving several universities, government ministries, and regional partners.

Importantly, early projects aligned with locally defined needs and interests. The most successful research initiatives responded to questions posed by Sri Lankan researchers, rather than being imported as ready-made agendas. This responsiveness built trust and helped demonstrate early relevance and value - - crucial for sustaining and expanding the work.

3. Equity is Built Through Shared Ownership

Power asymmetries can be a problem in international partnerships. Often, the institution with more resources sets the terms, controls the funding, and claims the visibility. One way to correct this imbalance is to share not only authorship and credit, but also access to financial and academic capital.

Graduate and post-graduate student-led research projects and modest internal seed grants can create early momentum. As joint publications and data accrue, external funders are more likely to take interest. Eventually, investigators in both countries write research proposals secure grants from their respective national medical science foundations. Locally led funding wins were particularly transformative, helping reduce dependence on external donors and affirming the scientific leadership of Sri Lankan researchers

This approach fosters a form of bidirectionality where both institutions contribute, both benefit, and both evolve.

4. Invest in Local Capacity and Infrastructure

International partnerships should not rely on shipping research samples across oceans or training Sri Lankan scientists abroad. Instead, investing in local laboratories, analytic capacity, and academic infrastructure is important - not only for equity but also for scientific agility.

In our own case, joint efforts supported the development of a Sri Lankan university laboratory that eventually played a national role during the COVID-19 pandemic. The goal has been for advanced diagnostics, real-time surveillance, and outbreak response to happen on-site, guided by Sri Lankan researchers. This local focus enables clinical trials, public health interventions, and faster data sharing with policymakers - narrowing the gap between evidence and action.

Similarly, capacity-building in research methodology, grant writing, and academic publishing empowers faculty and students to initiate their own studies, apply for competitive funding, and mentor others. This “train the trainer” effect has proven to be key to sustainability.

5. Students Are Catalysts and Multipliers

One of the most powerful drivers of success is student engagement. When structured well, student involvement becomes more than an educational experience—it becomes a vehicle for innovation, co-learning, and sustained connection.

Clinical “Electives for international medical students” have allowed international and local students to interact. And joint thesis projects (“twinning”), where students from partner institutions co-design and conduct field work, analyze data and write together, create lasting professional relationships while producing peer-reviewed manuscripts. Students are often more flexible, open to new methods, and able to adapt quickly to new cultural contexts. Moreover, many of the participating students later enter into senior academic or government positions as collaborators, or health policymakers.

Looking Ahead: From Collaboration to Co-Ownership

As partnerships mature, they can evolve from being a more transactional collaboration toward true co-ownership. This means co-developing infrastructure, co-leading daily operations and co-defining goals. It also means acknowledging and addressing structural barriers—whether academic, financial, or political—that limit the full participation by all partners.

Despite the inevitable challenges—from natural disasters to bureaucratic hurdles—enduring international collaborations can produce high quality research, education, and systems change that would be difficult to do in isolation.

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