

Lessons Learned about Coordinating Academic Partnerships from an International Network for Health Education

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Background

In 2008, five African institutions and University of Michigan entered into a partnership to establish the African Health Open Educational Resources (OER) Network (www.oerafrica.org/healthoer):

- South African Institute for Distance Education
- Kwame Nkrumah University of Science and Technology (Ghana)
- University of Ghana
- University of Cape Town (South Africa)
- University of the Western Cape (South Africa)
- University of Michigan

The mission of the Network is to advance health education in Africa by creating and promoting OER created by African academics to share knowledge, address curriculum gaps, and support health education communities across the continent. A founding principle of the Network was that collaborative regional networks are an essential component to foster multi-directional knowledge transfer.

Objective

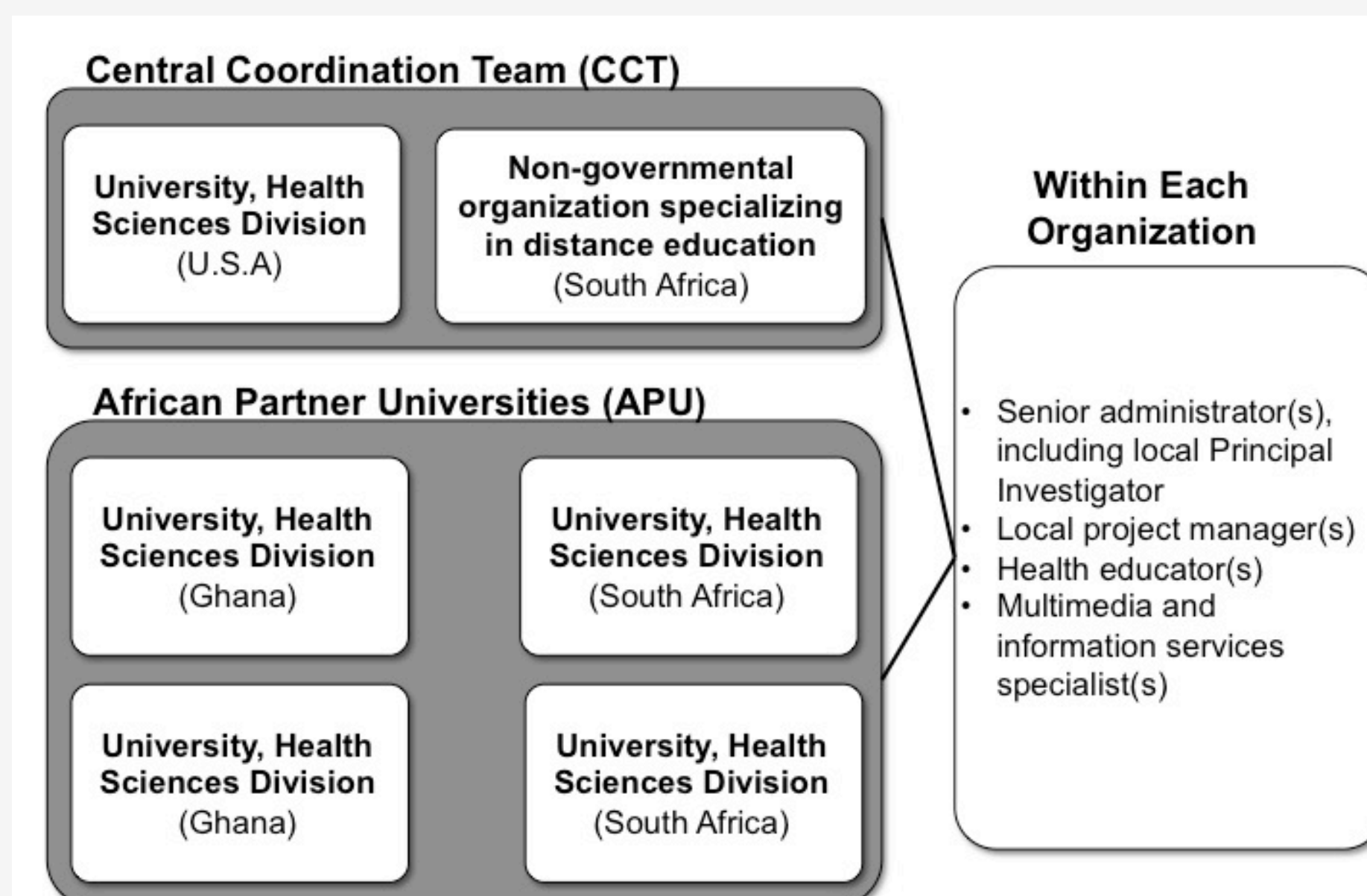
The complexity, scope and intensity of global health challenges demand international collaboration. The social, scientific, technological and organizational dynamics of these collaborations must be aligned to effectively address challenges resulting from resource, capacity, and power differences in the interaction of multiple organizational and national cultures. The existing literature lacks a systematic analysis of the communication and project management processes that impact international academic partnerships.

Methods

We employed semi-structured interviews, document analysis, and participant observation to examine the management and communication processes that led to the success of the Network.

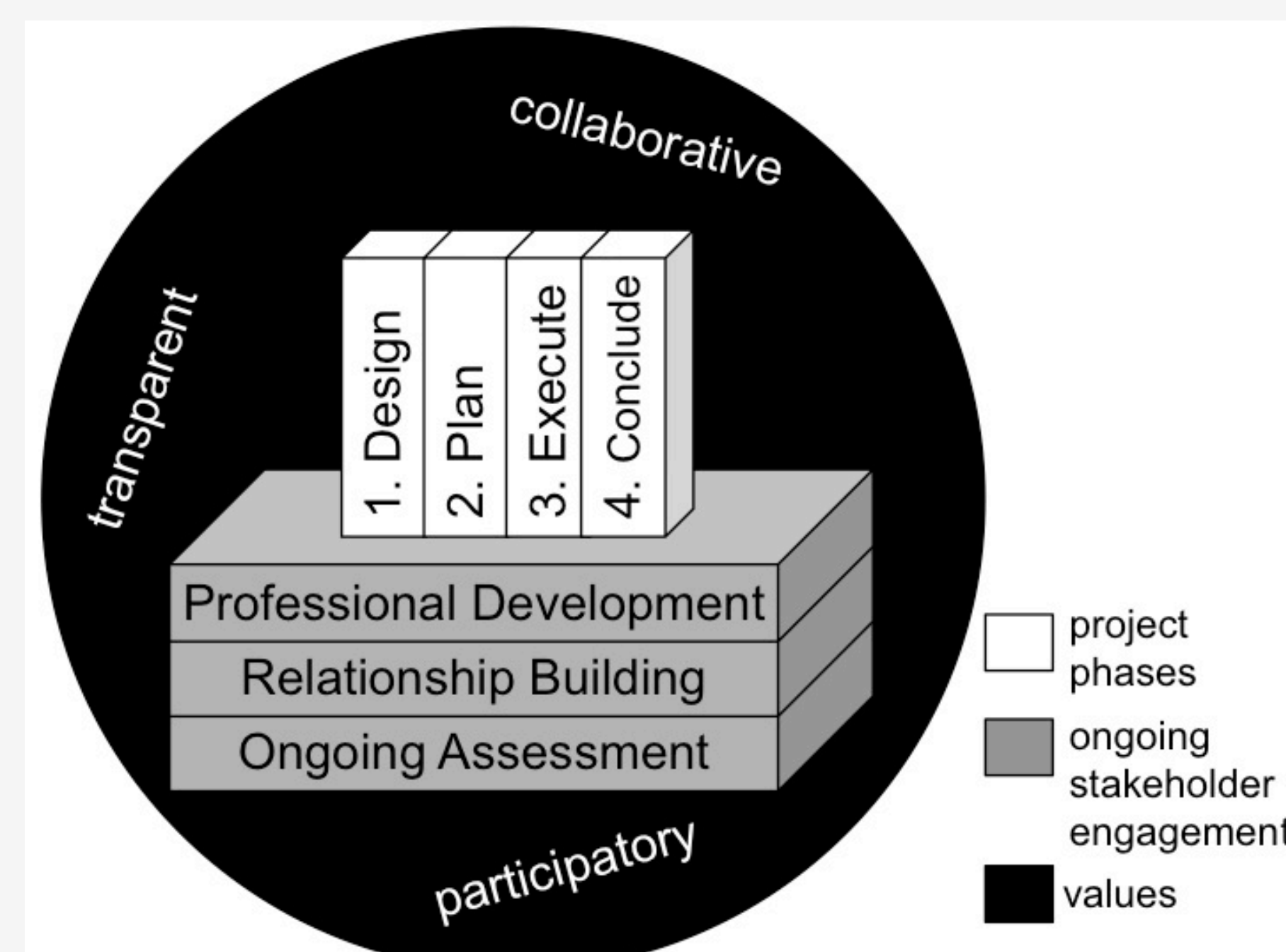
Organizational Structure

Participating organizations had senior administrators, project managers, health educators, and multimedia/information services specialists. These roles varied within each organization, and each organization may not have had someone in every role.



Organizational Values

During the visioning discussions, the Network participants agreed on shared values of transparency, collaboration, and active participation for our learning materials and our interactions. We employed methods to actively engage stakeholders throughout the project life cycle (design, planning, execution, and closure) through ongoing professional development, relationship building, and assessment activities.



Management and Communication Processes

Phase 1: Project Design

- Determined mutually beneficial objectives through in-person planning meeting with senior stakeholders from each participating organization.

Phase 2: Project Planning

- Discussed and addressed the effects of budget structures and organization policies on collaborative work.

Phase 3: Project Execution

- Created dedicated project management teams at the central coordination and participating institution levels.

Ongoing: Professional Development

- Facilitated loosely structured hands-on workshops.
- Organized interest groups to connect with peers doing similar work at other institutions.
- Pursued on-site collaborative projects (e.g. educational modules) jointly designed and implemented by staff from the Central Coordination Team and the local partner institutions working side-by-side.
- Liaised with coinciding relevant externally-funded fellowship and training opportunities.

Ongoing: Relationship Building

- Built on existing institutional relationships.
- Convened face-to-face meetings with individual institutions and collectively across institutions.
- Used photos and short bios to personalize remote interactions through e-mail, the website, and audio conferences.

Ongoing: Assessment

- Conducted regular internal & external assessments to understand and to respond to motivations, challenges, and achievements of the Network participants.

Phase 4: Project Closure

- Integrated the Open Educational Resource activities into participating institution's existing education routines, processes, and staffing structures.

Conclusion

As a result of this flexible approach to project management, the African collaborators reported that they felt they were considered equal partners and there were rarely concerns about cultural imperialism. The founding members now have in place processes, personnel, and, in some cases, official institutional policies to continue to support the creation, usage, distribution, and research related to health Open Educational Resources.

Related Publications (Open Access)

Luo, A, Omollo KL. Lessons Learned About Coordinating Academic Partnerships From an International Network for Health Education. *Acad Med.* 2013;88:1658–1664. doi: 10.1097/ACM.0b013e3182a7f815.

Luo A, Dianis N, Wolbach T, Omollo, KL. Regional Networks to Stimulate Multi-directional Knowledge Sharing. In: *Collaboration between Developed and Developing Countries Offers Opportunities to Amplify Global Health Research.* Science of Team Science Conference. 2013.

<http://hdl.handle.net/2027.42/102597>.

