Libyan Tutors' Perceptions about Collaboration at some Libyan Universities

Abusrewel, Fatma

Department of English, University of Tripoli, Tripoli /Libya

f.abusrewel@uot.edu.ly

ABSTRACT

This paper focuses on how academic staff members perceive collaboration. It is a qualitative study that aims to investigate the academic collaboration among Libyan tutors in terms of exchanging thoughts and ideas and to explore the perspectives of the Libyan tutor in terms of the impact of the collaboration on their knowledge. The research question is how Libyan tutors perceive academic collaboration? And what is the impact of that collaboration on their knowledge and skills? The findings reveal that there is incompatibility of the teachers' views and their actual practical situations; collaboration was viewed positively, but several obstacles are found to impede it.

الملخص

تركز هذا الدراسة على مدى تفهم أساتذة الجامعة لمفهوم التعاون الأكاديمي بينهم. الدراسة كيفية تسمعي لاستطلاع الآراء حول التعاون الأكاديمي من حيث تبادل الأفكار من وجهة نظر المعنين بأثر التعاون الأكاديمي في تطور المعرفة. وقد طرحت الدراسة سؤالين: كيف يتفهم الأساتذة التعاون الأكاديمي وأثر هذا علي تطور المعرفة والمهارات. وأظهرت النتائج عدم التوافق بين الآراء رغم ترحيبهم بالتعاون. هناك عوائق كثيرة تحول دون تحقيقه.

KEYWORDS: Collaboration, sharing knowledge, innovation, coauthorship, knowledge transfer.

Introduction

The study of collaboration opens a big window on the various common types of research collaboration and how academic university staff perceives them. The concept collaboration is complex, representing a high level of human relationship and strictly reserved for research that includes personal interactions taking various forms ranging from offering general advice and insights to active participation in a specific piece of research.

Collaboration being increasingly common, it may be conjectured that it must be more effective than working alone in some instances. Research collaborations are usually measured by co-authorships. Thus, formal communication and references to other scientists are regarded as a different phenomenon. It is assumed that all scientists who collaborate become co-authors (Gordon, 1980, p.194). Co-authorship usually reflects mutual intellectual and social influence where collaborators engage in informal communication before it becomes formal. Thus, many university researchers tend to think of collaboration in terms of co-authorship. For this reason, much of the published work about research collaboration focuses on co-authorship.

Katz and Martin (1997) and Bozeman et al. (2012) point out that co-authorship is at best a partial indicator of collaboration which brings together of talents of researchers for the purpose of knowledge creation and usually results in an identifiable knowledge product (Bozeman & Slade, 2013).

Literature review

Collaboration

Collaboration in work settings may allow professionals to come into contact with ideas and approaches of other professionals, and this has the potential to enable them to consider alternatives. Collaboration is defined as "individuals who differ in notable ways sharing information and working toward a particular purpose" (Amabile et al. 2001, p.419).

Therefore, collaborative activities in academic work are considered to be an important vehicle for professional development of academics and generation of new ideas which are the core feature of academic work in any sector (Beaver 2001; Van Rijnsoever, Hessels &Vandeberg, 2008).Thus, collaboration provides a context for learning, knowledge transfer and skills development, and facilitates network building and professional connection (Bozeman, Dietz, &Gaughan, 2001).

It offers situated learning and participation, in which the emphasis on understanding the development from legitimate peripheral participation to be a full member in a community (Lave & Wenger, 1991).The community functions as unified collectives to achieve the intended goals if they belong to communities of practice in which participants share similar repertoire and have mutual agreement (Wenger,1998).

Types of collaboration

There are many types of collaborations among researchers ranging from offering general advice and insights to active participation in a piece of research. Co-authorship is one of the most common types of collaboration. According to Katz and Martin (1997), co-authorship has

the potential to improve the quality of work and improves the probability of acceptance for publication in prestigious journals. Co-authorship between researchers within a community is considered as the most important measure for collaboration (Laudel, 2002). The other type of collaboration is scientific collaboration in which research is implicitly seen as scientific research that plays a key role in scientific discovery in terms of solving scientific problems and promoting understanding and integration (Sonnenwald, 2003a).Researchers work together to achieve a common goal of producing a new scientific knowledge.

Benefits of collaboration

Collaboration has many benefits to researchers in terms of developing skills and knowledge and exchanging ideas and expertise in various fields (Lambert, 2003, p. 38). Academic staff engage in research collaboration in order to gain access to new resources (Heinze &Kuhlmann, 2008;Vanrijnsoever, Hessels, &Vandeberg, 2008) and encourage the rapid spread and the sharing of knowledge (Beaver, 2001). Sonnenwald (2007) argues that collaboration strengthens national unity and improves research infrastructure by diffusing knowledge through creating networks of researchers. When a more experienced researcher collaborates with a beginner one, the beginner one can develop knowledge and skills, develop the ability to plan and conduct research, and increase contacts with other researchers in the field (Bozeman & Corley, 2004, p.601).

In this sense, the more experienced researcher can be considered as a mentor and facilitator. Moreover, multiple collaborations bring faculty

members together to solve issues or to participate and discuss common work tasks, allowing intense interaction, exchanges of ideas and the application of knowledge from members (Powell, 1998). In general, collaboration between peers (i.e., scientists of a similar discipline) is likely to happen than collaboration between individuals of unequal rank, but this is by no means always the case. However, evidence of growth in collaboration can be seen in the increase of a multiple authorship.

Melin (2000) points out that collaboration generates more knowledge, which, in turn, leads to new ideas (innovation) and academic productivity. Likewise, collaboration provides intellectual companionship in which an individual can partly overcome the intellectual isolation through collaborating with other researchers, forming working and personal relationships with them (Lave & Wenger, 1991). Collaboration also provides researchers with opportunities to have a wider network of contacts in the scientific community that facilitates searching for information or advice (Wenger, 1998). In this sense, the individual can greatly extend that network.

Collaboration appears to offer authors another advantage when it comes to a paper being submitted for publication regardless of the disciplines-this is in itself an aim to which many researchers pay great attention (Müller and de Rijcke, 2017). Collaborative papers, for instance, tend to get cited more often. Collaboration provides access to a greater breadth and depth of research knowledge than pure in-house development. In addition, trust and balanced mutual benefits among partners are the main factors to ensure successful research collaboration. Conducting the right

type of research and engaging in collaboration has the potential to contribute to the research success. A promotion in academic rank can be seen as a reward a researcher receives for his or her research (Bozeman & Corley, 2004). However, collaboration may bring about a clash of views; a cross-fertilisation of ideas which may in turn generates new insights or perspectives that individuals, who work on their own, would not have achieved (Hoch,1987).Therefore, collaboration can be a source of stimulation and creativity.

However, collaborations do not have benefits only, there are costs involved in terms of time, money, and management efforts. For instance, Wray (2006) argues that research collaboration can lead to problems with assigning credit to the participants, particularly when it comes to publications. Moreover, Stokes and Hartley (1989) indicate that sometimes a researcher is listed as a co-author, simply by virtue of providing material or performing a routine assay. In addition, an individual may provide a key idea for research, but s/he is not included as a co-author, and this is quite likely to undervalue a beginner researcher's contribution to research. However, it is not necessary that collaboration leads to a publication and not all co-authorship papers are results of a collaborative research process.

Methodology

This study was mainly qualitative because it focused on the perceptions and perspectives of academics in order to understand the nature of collaboration between them. The results from the questionnaire questions provided statistical data in forms of percentages. Elsewhere the data from

the questionnaires was qualitative represented in the responses to open-ended questions. The participants were 12: 6 males and 6 females. Non-probability sampling was used because the sample was selected purposively (i.e. hand-picked for purpose) (Robson & McCartan, 2016).

The participants were selected according to the following criteria: They are all Libyans, teach English to university students, they are aged from 30-55, and they teach English at different departments within the University of Tripoli and Asmarya University. This study forms a case study because it focuses on a group of Libyan tutors who are teaching English as a foreign Language in the Libyan context. Ethical issue such as permission, anonymity, informed consent, privacy, and confidentiality were taken into account.

Previous studies examining perceptions and motives for collaboration tend to be based on either interview or questionnaire data. Thus, semi-structured interviews and questionnaire were used to collect data about how university staff members perceive research collaborations and its forms, reasons for participating or reasons for non-participating in them. The questionnaires were distributed to group of tutors in order to collect initial data, because they are anonymous and this is likely to encourage greater honesty. The questionnaires were given face-face to the participants at the universities, and, as a tutor, the researcher was available to simplify the questions and to collect the questionnaires back. Since it was completed at the universities, there was 90% response rate. The questionnaire included an introduction on the cover sheet which explained the researcher's role and the aims of the research. The

questions used were open-ended and were designed to elicit data to answer the research questions and to achieve the aims.

Semi-structured is flexible because it has the potential to allow the researcher to follow the participants' answers and to ask for clarification if necessary (Kvale & Brinkmann, 2009). Semi-structured interviews were conducted with 12 teachers who were volunteered to participate in the interviews from the questionnaire sample. Face to face interviews added depth to the data collected by the questionnaire. The interviews which lasted 30 minutes each were recorded and notes were taken during the interview in order to fill in any missing details. Thematic analysis (Braun and Clarke, 2006; Thomas and Harden, 2008) was done manually and undertaken through identification of themes and codes.

Data analysis and discussion

The responses of the questionnaire reveal that all the participants (100%) have the intention to collaborate with other academic staff stating that collaboration opens a wide window to knowledge sharing and making network. Their views went around their co-authorships. This represents a positive trend towards collaboration for the long term.

Statements

1-What comes to your mind when you hear "collaboration"?

Table (1) below indicates the different percentages of the first item of the questionnaire.(1-totally agree-2=agree-3=disagree-4=Totally disagree

Item1	1	2	3	4
sharing knowledge with others in different fields	100%	0%	0%	0%
participating with other researcher(s) in a project/research	10%	70%	10%	10%
writing a research paper with other researcher(s)	50%	34%	10%1	6%
helping other people in doing academic work	20%	60%	15%	5%
assisting other colleague(s) in academic work	29%	60%	7%	4%
co-authoring with other researchers	50%	30%	10%	10%
offering advice to other researcher(s) or colleague(s)	10%	75%	10%	5%
reviewing any academic work of other academics	30%	45%	25%	0%
Giving advice when required	40%	35%	25%	0%
assisting beginner researchers when seeking help or advice	45%	50%	4%	1%
doing good work with senior academics	90%	10%	0%	0%

Intention to collaboration

It was noticed from the responses that many beginner tutors (80%) have the interest to share knowledge and collaborate with other tutors. Though many referred to co-authorship, they showed positive attitude towards collaboration with more experienced, but not vice versa. Zhour was one example of those but was not encouraged to collaborate with others as a result of what she heard from her colleagues However, the study reveals that several obstacles are found to impede collaboration among staff members. They are as follow:

Fear and lack of trust

The findings of this study reveal that some participants indicate that fear and lack of trust hinder the collaboration among staff members within the university. For instance, fear among academic staff towards collaboration and their resistance to change are barriers for collaboration and the greatest obstacle to overcome. For instance, Reem (a beginner researcher) stated, *I do not want to do any academic work with any staff member here. They won't consider me as equal to them. I think they may abuse me and I don't get my right compared to the effort and work I do.*

Sarah is another lecturer who referred to lacking of trust as an impediment of collaboration. She mentioned that she asked a colleague some advice regarding writing an article for publication. That colleague changed that to become a co-author in that article. Such incident made some teachers see collaboration as purely individual matter and avoid seeking knowledge or sharing it with others:

I do not have confidence to share my knowledge with my colleagues. Once I asked my colleague to give me feedback on my writing for promotion. She gave me constructive feedback and asked me to write her name on the paper (silence). Therefore, I prefer to conduct a research and write my paper by myself.

What mentioned above has been noticed by (Azudin, Ismail, &Taherali, 2009; Fong & Chu (2006).This might be related to lack of experience, and community of practice. which has been exacerbated by the current situation of the country (Wenger, 1998)

Lack of incentives and encouragement of innovation

This study signifies that in general disciplinary research collaboration is more rewarding for researchers and that there is a lack of incentives to engage in interdisciplinary research collaboration due to different reasons. For instance, Nora mentioned that:

> *I have no desire to share my thoughts and ideas with my colleagues in our department. In the promotion, there is no significant difference between the lecturer and lecturer assistant.*

The above comment indicates that the lack of motivation and incentives has negatively affected Nora's collaboration with others.

Lack of integration among staff members

The results illustrate that about 70% of participants are dissatisfied with their relationship with other colleagues. This situation gets worse due to the outbreak of the COVID-19 pandemic. Aizhar is one of them stating that

> Staff members don't meet very often (except in official meetings organized by the department). There is Lack (her emphasis) of professional symposiums/seminars that can broaden the horizon of staff members and encourage them to do collaborative work.

Furthermore, Hened referred to the situation as it is not new. Everything has changed and people here have different opinions and loyalty. This can be attributed to the lack of community which referred to by (Wenger, 1998).

Fadia expressed her dissatisfaction stating that;

> I went to faculties and distributed my questionnaire to many staff members who I know personally. Though they showed their interest and promised to send their questionnaires, only some returned after few weeks. What I call this (Her emphasis)

IS THERE ABSENCE OF COLLABORATION AMONG COLLEAGUES?

Again, this is attributed to different reasons among which are the absences of collaborative senses among colleagues. This absence is exacerbated by the current situation of the country in general.

Weak cooperation

Another reason of collaboration absence is the weak cooperation between beginner tutors and the more experiences ones. The formers do not ask for chances of sharing knowledge in different ways. On their turns, the later do not offer chances to beginner colleagues to participate in research. The beginner researchers find difficulties in dealing with the experienced ones. Jad Allah referred to that,

> I asked some experienced colleagues about filling in a form of evaluating papers for promotion. It was my first time to review them. I could not get any information that helps me carry on the task. I could not find an excuse to what happened. I did my best and finished the duty without their help. I'll never ask for help again.

The researcher collected volumes of university journals mainly in social sciences from 2010 to 2020 and found only 3% of the published work is co-authored by two or three authors only. This is an indicator of the limitation of co-authorship as a means of collaboration and knowledge

sharing. This might be related to various reasons.

Conclusion

This research investigated the staff members' perceptions of collaboration in two Libyan Universities; the University of Tripoli and Asmarya University. The data collected from the questionnaire revealed having positive attitude towards collaboration in general. The participants also connected collaboration with co-authorship especially beginner lecturers. This can be attributed to their current situation as there are no other forms of collaboration. Thus collaboration is viewed from one particular angle especially from those of social sciences and in light of absence of planning collaboration on the levels of universities in general. However, in the second questions, there was incompatibility of their views and their actual practical situations. The interviews data revealed the obstacles that impede collaboration among staff members which are exacerbated by the ongoing conflict. The inference that can be drawn that collaboration is limited and the reasons behind that are of many sources.

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