

Reflections on collaboration within SA Higher Education by two bloodied but unbowed participants

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Abstract

A sage once said: "Remember! Collaboration seldom walks more than 50 paces and never climbs stairs." Over the past years there have been several notable collaborative ventures mounted by South African tertiary educational institutions. Apart from collaboration at academic level, these include national and regional networking initiatives, regional library consortia, administrative initiatives and, of course, the CITTE series itself.

Taking a managerial viewpoint, the paper examines the difficulties inherent in collaborative service provision and argues that it is best to structure the collaborative venture along normal business lines and to try to confine the need to sustain collaborative behaviour to top political levels in the institutions.

What collaborations are we considering?

We are dealing here with formal collaborations between higher educational institutions, where the prime drivers of the working together are not political or matters of policy or governance, but functional need or economic advantage. We further restrict attention to **infrastructure collaborations**, by which we mean collaborations that are aimed at improving and/or reducing the cost of providing support infrastructure and services.

Perhaps the greatest infrastructure collaboration in the history of South African Higher Education, and the greatest success story too, is the national academic and research network, UNINET. A description of the purpose and scope of UNINET can be found on its web site at <http://www.frd.ac.za/uninet>.

Regional library consortia, especially the Gaelic consortium in Gauteng and the Calico one in the Western Cape, are infrastructure collaborations of major importance for higher education in South Africa. A description of academic library consortia in South Africa can be found in [1].

Other well-known examples of infrastructure collaborations within the higher education sector are the Adamastor Network in the Western Cape, the Central Applications Office of the Eastern Seaboard Association of Tertiary Institutions (ESATI), the CUP Buying Consortium, the ill-fated Unikom collaboration, the SABINET national catalogue, and finally, the CITTE series of conferences. In this paper we shall also comment on the emerging new networking collaboration, in which the Tertiary Education Network (TENET), in which we are both closely involved, will replace UNINET.

Infrastructure collaborations tend to be technocratic

Political commentators have observed that the European Union is a "technocracy" - a collection of policies, rules and procedures developed and run by administrators, economists, scientists and technologists that, by and large, has not captured the hearts and minds of the denizens of Europe. The collaborations we are considering also tend to be technocratic in their concerns, activities and leadership. End-user participation in the development of the collaboration is usually very limited.

For example, our library consortia have focussed on the selection and deployment of new library information systems – the very stuff of today’s library technocrats. To this day in the Western Cape institutions, there are senior academics of the highest standing who firmly believe that every rand that is spent on CALICO would be better spent buying monographs for their departmental libraries.

Similarly, the new networking initiative is focussed on the creation of a Virtual Private Network linking higher educational and research institutions to each other and to the Internet, and on a new company to manage the collaboration – the very stuff of today’s e-technocrats.

When is collaboration really present and working?

It is easy to conceive of worthwhile collaborative ventures, but much harder to establish them and turn them into going concerns. We offer the follow list of factors, each of which indicates that real collaboration is taking place.

- Each member is committed to incur costs to pursue joint objectives that cannot be reached by individual members acting alone.
- Agreements are in place that define what the collaboration does, how its activities are resourced and how collective decisions at all levels are taken.
- Collective decisions are being taken and are accepted by the members.
- Each member incurs costs that are not directly ascribable to benefits for itself. Likewise, each member receives benefits for which it does not directly bear the cost.
- End-beneficiaries of the collaboration believe that the collaboration is working and is in their interest.

The established collaborative practice of *inter-library loans* provides an excellent illustration of all of these points.

Boissé’s ten postulates

Five years ago, Joseph A Boissé published ten interesting “postulates” about library cooperation [2]. Without exception, the underlying message in each postulate applies to collaborations generally. Boissé’s postulates are briefly discussed in this section, with a view to identifying the three or four toughest challenges that face would-be collaborations.

1. Cooperation is easy when money is plentiful.

The real message in this truism is: cooperation is tough when budgets are under pressure. It is harder then to find the resources to investigate proposals and to negotiate with other institutions. And, of course, it is precisely when budgets are under pressure, that service directors are most interested in collaborations as a means of trying to reduce operational costs.

2. Cooperation is easier to launch with someone else’s money.

This sounds cynical, but Boissé does not intend it that way, and nor do we see it so. The support given by the Mellon Foundation, the Open Society Foundation and other foundations to collaborative ventures in South Africa has been of the greatest importance. No only have these Foundations funded the deployment of new infrastructure, but they have often contributed to the pre-start-up costs of getting collaborative ventures properly conceived and structured.

The postulate is also well illustrated in the early history of UNINET. In the late 1980’s working groups of University IT Directors endeavoured to bring about some form of inter-institutional networking. However it was only when the late Vic Shaw persuaded the then Foundation for Research Development (now incorporated into the National Research Foundation) to create and seed-fund a project that a network was systematically designed, terminal equipment deployed and a coherent network of point-to-point links established.

The wisdom of this postulate can be exploited even when external funding is not expected, in that the start-up costs of collaborative ventures can be funded from internal sources other than the normal operating budgets of the collaborating departments.

3. The more meaningful the cooperation, the more difficult it will be to implement.

Boissé contrasts easier but less meaningful collaborations like sharing the costs of staff training with more meaningful ventures like collaborative cataloguing which are much more difficult to implement because they alter the way normal work is done.

Turning to local examples, the CITTE series of conferences, the provision of shared ftp and netnews servers and joint bargaining with vendors are all examples of easier collaborations that have little impact on the way normal work is done.

The Central Applications Office represents a braver collaboration that required quite substantial agreements about changes to the way applications from would-be students are attracted and processed by the member institutions of ESATI.

CALICO's vision of building a shared library information system, which envisaged the merging of the five institutional catalogues and direct borrowing by patrons of any library from any other library, was truly heroic in both meaningfulness and difficulty. Librarians from all five institutions have put in a tremendous amount of dedicated committee work since the original formation of the consortium in 1992. Today, CALICO operates a shared library information systems platform, using the Aleph 500 system from Ex Libris, but it has yet to merge the five databases and implement communal circulation practices.

4. Cooperation is easier to establish in hitherto unexplored areas

This postulate is also very well illustrated in the history of UNINET. In the early days of data communications in South Africa, there was simply no other way to establish inter-institutional networks than to do it oneself. Once Vic Shaw and the FRD provided the required coordination and seed money, as mentioned above, it was an obvious win-win decision for each institution to participate and the network was established without further organisational difficulties. The institutions were getting something they had not had before, and none had to give up anything or change old ways of working.

We discuss Boissé's next three postulates, which we regard as his crux postulates, together. They are:

5. The more democratic the organisation you create; the more difficult the decision-making will be.

6. Your own organisation will never be the same again.

7. Be prepared to lose some autonomy.

In our opinion, these three postulates summarise the cardinal difficulties that confront meaningful collaborative ventures. They concern the difficulties and challenges of managing the collaboration and its impacts on the participating institutions. On the one hand, it is very difficult for a service department, which is accountable for service delivery to its home public, to allow another party (the consortium) to make operational decisions for it. On the other hand, though, it is virtually impossible to run a joint service operation if every decision has to be achieved through consensus among independent participants.

The following extract from the GAELIC Memorandum of Agreement [3] reflects the participating institutions' deep concern of preserving institutional autonomy and the guarantee of consensus as the basis for collaborative decision taking.

BASIS OF THE AGREEMENT: It is the fundamental basis of this agreement and the functioning of GAELIC that each party's institutional autonomy and academic freedom will be maintained, respected and upheld. Within this

framework, the parties will bind themselves to this agreement and undertake to cooperate and support one another, be of service to one another, and honour the obligations arising from this agreement.

VISION: The vision of GAELIC is to create a virtual library with local service interfaces, forming part of a global information community for clients in Gauteng and its environs. This will be achieved by a group of autonomous tertiary libraries, utilising technology and linked by networks, which accept the need to explore co-operation and collaboration by consensus as a response to the educational, training and information needs of the country.

With these principles assured, and with no autonomy-threatening intentions to build a shared library information system as envisaged by CALICO, GAELIC was able to quickly select a common library information system and implement it separately at each site.

By contrast, CALICO's vision of a shared library information system based on a single database immediately and incisively threatens institutional autonomy and implies major changes in many work processes. The CALICO committees have laboured intensely under the burden of these cardinal challenges. In our opinion, CALICO has not really come to terms with them, and until it does so, progress will continue to be painful and slow.

UNINET did not suffer from these difficulties to any great extent, because it was never managed on a cooperative basis, but as a project of the FRD (later, the NRF), with its Manager and staff being employees of the FRD. Institutions bought bandwidth from UNINET and could monitor delivery using the excellent management information that UNINET provided. To the participating institutions, the relationship with UNINET was similar to that with a vendor, with the difference in the earlier years that it was unique. Later, when commercial Internet service providers entered the scene, UNINET was caught by surprise when some institutions reduced their orders and adopted other suppliers. For some time, this left UNINET with a net deficit on its income statement, and the NRF is still burdened with a net deficit.

In the remaining sections of this paper we present an approach to the structuring of collaborations that we feel minimizes these difficulties.

8. Success will be dependent on effective delivery.

Collaboration, though laudable, is not an end-objective. Delivery to the end beneficiaries of the outputs of the collaboration is the final determinant of success.

9. Once established, cooperatives tend to remain in existence.

This postulate rests on Boissé's observation that while library cooperatives have been proliferating since the 1970's, they very seldom merge with each other or go out of existence. Of course the tendency is well known for organisations to take on a life of their own which they strive to preserve! And who wants to take the lead in terminating collaboration?

In this regard we applaud the forthrightness of Dr. Khotso Mokele, President of the National Research Foundation (NRF), who, in 1998, declared unequivocally that the NRF could not continue for much longer provide a legal and financial home for UNINET. This clear statement served powerfully to focus the attention of the higher education community on the need to establish a new ownership model for its collaborative provision of networking services. The new company called TENET that we discuss below will meet this need.

10. Don't boast too much about success.

The danger that Boissé sees is that if too much attention is drawn to the success of a collaborative venture, then the participants may see their budgets cut as institutional administrations try to grab the savings for use elsewhere! We leave the reader to determine what weight to assign to this difficulty!

A business approach to structuring collaborations

In this section we argue that those who would champion an infrastructure collaboration can minimize the crucial inherent difficulties listed in Boissé's postulates, and especially the crux difficulties in postulates 5,6 and 7, by structuring the collaborative venture as much as possible *like a normal business operation having normal businesslike relationships with its customers*. The more meaningful the collaboration, the more it will have to contend with these difficulties if the collaboration attempts to organise itself merely through sharing operational responsibilities and resources.

We believe that the key is to identify and ensure arms-length separation between three key management roles:

- (a) responsibility for meeting the needs of end-users in each institution;
- (b) responsibility for the provision of the collaborative services; and
- (c) responsibility for institutional commitments to, and shared ownership of, the collaboration.

We offer some guidelines that can assist in developing businesslike structural models for collaborations.

1. Separate the roles of customer and provider.

The first guideline is the separation of responsibilities of the collaborative service provider from those of the institutional service provider. The collaborative enterprise should have its own organizational identity and operational management structure. We do not believe that any manager, say an IT Director, should be cast as both a customer of a collaboratively provided service and also as jointly responsible for the provision of that service. We do not believe in the model that has the collaborative operation being run by a committee of managers drawn from the participating institutions. Indeed, we think this is how to maximize, rather than minimize, the difficulty of running a collaborative service operation. And we have experienced the paralysis that it can engender through the eternal threat of veto of one.

2. Position the institutions as customers

Often the initiative for founding an infrastructure collaboration will have come from the director level within the participating institutions. Notwithstanding this, we believe that when the collaboration goes operational, the departmental directors involved should not continue with managerial roles in running the collaboration's operations, but should interface with the collaborative enterprise as customers.

In some circumstances, a formal User Group could be an important means whereby the directors can agree on joint communications, new service requests and the like.

3. Position the collaborative enterprise as a service provider

The founders of a collaboration should see themselves as jointly creating a new service provider to which they all intend to outsource the provision of the agreed services. The sole task of the organization should be to deliver agreed services at agreed levels and prices in terms of service contracts with the institutions as its customers. This depends of the scope and size of the collaboration, but as far as possible, the operational staff of the collaboration should be dedicated to that role – not secondees or nominees from the institutions to a joint team. In particular, the Operations Manager of the collaboration should have that as his sole job.

The collaborative enterprise should derive revenue from the institutions as payments for services rendered according to an agreed price structure, rather than as top-slice contributions calculated according to the number of student FTEs or some other some allocation rule.

4. Appoint an expert management board rather than a representative one

The task of the management board of the collaboration must be to manage the affairs of the collaboration so that it meets the agreed objectives. This requires board members whose experience and contacts can assist the enterprise. The management board must have full authority to manage the affairs of the company. The institutions should not have direct involvement in the day-to-day management of the enterprise.

5. Have the collaboration owned at political levels in the institutions

Finally, the collaboration requires commitment and support from each institution at the top level. A Members' Committee, comprising a senior executive from each institution or perhaps, group of institutions, should formally own the collaborative enterprise. The prime task of the Members' Committee is to appoint the members of the management board and to review the constitution, vision and objectives, and annual financial statements of the collaboration from time to time. Apart from this, the Members' Committee should not be involved at all in managing the affairs of the enterprise.

Some might feel that these guidelines, taken together, virtually eliminate collaborative approaches and behaviour. And indeed, except at the political level within the Members' Committee, and within the debates and resolutions of a Users' Group, our whole approach is to try to replace the difficult and conflicting demands of collaboration with the customary ones of running effective relationships between customers and suppliers.

Structuring the new Tertiary Education Network – TENET

The Tertiary Education Network, or TENET for short, is being formed to take over from UNINET as the organisation responsible for providing Internet access to universities, technikons and research institutions in South Africa. At the same time, TENET will be the corporate customer through which Telkom SA will provide the actual networking services, as a customer specific solution agreed under the US Donors' Bandwidth Initiative for Higher Education in South Africa. Dr Stuart Saunders, former Vice-Chancellor of the University of Cape Town, in his capacity as the Representative in South Africa of the Mellon Foundation and leader of the US Donors' Bandwidth Initiative, has led the team that has negotiated with Telkom and is creating TENET. The team was established and authorised by the institutional heads, through the South African Universities Vice-Chancellors' Association (SAUVCA) and the Committee of Technikon Principals (CTP). Both writers of this paper are members of the team, as is Henry Watermeyer, the IT Director of the University of the Witwatersrand. The work and costs associated with the creation of TENET and the negotiations with Telkom have been generously supported by the US Donors.

Like UNINET, TENET will have an annual turnover of around R15 million, but unlike UNINET, it will not actually operate routers, cache servers or other network devices. It will manage the contractual and business relationship with Telkom, the service provision relationships with each of the sites, and any assistance from the US Donors. TENET hopes to retain as customers all the institutions that are currently using UNINET, and to attract back those universities and technikons that currently use commercial ISPs in preference to UNINET.

In this section we briefly describe the way that TENET will be structured. There being more than thirty institutions involved, it was clear that SAUVCA and CTP, rather than the institutions individually and collectively, should own TENET. This is being achieved by creating TENET as a Section 21 company not for profit, with SAUVCA and CTP each entitled, according to Articles of Association of TENET, to nominate a specified number of individuals to act as **Members of TENET**, in the sense of the Companies Act of 1973, as amended. Members take decisions at General Meetings of the company, and their prime collaborative duties are to appoint the directors of the company and maintain the Articles of Association. The personal liability of each Member is limited to the sum of one rand.

A **Board of Directors**, not the Members, will manage TENET. The draft Articles of Association provide for at least five and at most nine Directors. The Board will be fully empowered to manage TENET's affairs, and may delegate powers to an Executive Director or Executive Committee. An important principle underlying the composition of the initial Board is that it is not composed of institutional or regional representatives – i.e. is not seen as being a representative body, but rather as an expert one, where each Director's knowledge and experience can be of value in managing the company. The term of office of any Director will expire at the first Annual General Meeting of TENET following his or her appointment.

The initial Board will be comprised as follows:

Chair: Dr Stuart Saunders

Deputy Chair and Public Officer: Dr Jim Leatt

CTP nominee: Professor Roy du Pré

SAUVCA nominee: Ms Piyushi Kotecha

IT Directors' nominee: Mr Henry Watermeyer

US Donors' nominee: Mr Tom Nygren (Mellon Foundation)

Internet Service Providers' Association nominee: Mr Myron Zlotnik

An industry expert: Mr Chris Pinkham

Executive Director: To be appointed.

TENET will not be dependent on operating grants from the participating institutions. Its **revenues** will derive from payments by institutions for Internet connectivity services. Its relationships with the institutions will be those of a supplier with a customer, resting on a simple contractual basis. TENET will encourage the formation of active regional and national User Groups, and will provide some financial assistance to support the activities of such groups.

Conclusion

We have presented the case that the best way to structure a collaborative venture is to minimise the amount of sustained collaborative behaviour that is required. We argue that this can be done by structuring the collaboration to operate as much as possible like a normal business having the collaborating departments as its customers and having clear separation of the functions of representing the interests of the institutions from those of managing service delivery.

REFERENCES

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- [2] Joseph A Boissé. **Library cooperation: a remedy but not a panacea**. IFLA Journal 21 (2), 1995, pp. 89 – 93.
- [3] See <http://www.sabinet.co.za/gaelic/memorand.html> (good as at 5 June 2000)