

Researcher's Experiences of Institutional Power in Intra-Country Research Collaboration: Evidence from Botswana

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Abstract

Research collaboration is widely promoted as a mechanism for enhancing scientific productivity, institutional capacity, and knowledge exchange. However, limited empirical attention has been directed toward how institutional power shapes collaborative research within national research systems in the Global South. This study examines researchers' experiences of institutional power in collaborative research between the University of Botswana (UB) and the Botswana Institute for Technology Research and Innovation (BITRI), with particular emphasis on how participation, authority, recognition, and epistemic legitimacy are structured in intra-country research collaboration. Specifically, the study explored the procedures and criteria used to select researchers into collaborative projects, examined how research agendas are determined, investigated governance and operational dynamics, and analysed researchers' lived experiences of participation, including benefits, constraints, and professional outcomes. Anchored within an interpretivist–phenomenological methodological framework, the study employed a qualitative research design to capture researchers' lived experiences and meanings attached to collaborative engagement. Data were generated through semi-structured interviews with twenty-five purposively selected researchers from UB and BITRI and analysed using thematic analysis supported by NVivo software. The analysis was theoretically informed by Organisational Power Theory and World-Systems Theory, which together provided a multi-level explanatory framework for understanding how institutional authority, governance arrangements, and epistemic hierarchies shape collaborative research processes. The findings reveal that collaborative research within Botswana is not inherently egalitarian but is structured through institutional hierarchies, differentiated mandates, and unequal access to symbolic and material resources. Researcher selection emerged as a foundational mechanism through which authority and participation are allocated, privileging proposal-stage actors and established academic networks. Agenda-setting authority was concentrated among researchers and institutions positioned closest to funding streams and proposal development, while governance structures reinforced

differentiated autonomy and restricted influence, particularly among junior and BITRI-based researchers. Although collaboration generated tangible benefits, including skills development, networking, and methodological learning, these gains did not consistently translate into recognition, authorship, or career advancement. Concerns regarding data ownership and interpretive authority further highlighted the reproduction of epistemic inequality, whereby some researchers remained data generators while others retained conceptual and symbolic control over knowledge production. The study concludes that intra-country research collaboration may reproduce inequalities commonly associated with North–South partnerships, demonstrating that institutional mandates, governance structures, and proximity to resources shape domestic epistemic hierarchies. The study therefore argues for more equitable governance systems, transparent agenda-setting, inclusive recognition mechanisms, and shared authority to foster sustainable and just collaborative research environments.

Keywords: *Botswana, Epistemic Inequality, Institutional Power, Organisational Power Theory, Research Collaboration, World-Systems Theory.*

1. Introduction

Prevailing scholarship on research collaboration has largely focused on North–South partnerships, where inequalities in funding control, agenda-setting, authorship, and epistemic authority remain pervasive (Crawford et al., 2021; Moyi Okwaro and Geissler, 2015). Although often framed as mutually beneficial, such collaborations frequently reproduce asymmetrical power relations that privilege Global North institutions in shaping research priorities, methodologies, dissemination, and intellectual recognition. However, limited scholarly attention has been directed towards how similar inequalities manifest within national research systems, particularly among institutions within the same Global South context. This represents an important empirical and conceptual gap, as assumptions of equity in intra-country collaborations may obscure how institutional mandates, organisational hierarchies, funding disparities, and unequal academic capital shape participation and influence, even in domestic research partnerships. In Botswana, collaborative research has become increasingly important in advancing scientific knowledge, informing policy, and fostering innovation (Bonsu, Frasso, and Curry, 2017). Institutions such as the University of Botswana (UB) and the Botswana Institute for Technology Research and Innovation (BITRI) are encouraged to collaborate to strengthen national research capacity, promote interdisciplinary engagement, and contribute to socio-economic development (Thato and Naledi, 2025). However, limited empirical evidence exists regarding how such collaborations are experienced and governed in practice, particularly from the perspectives of participating researchers. Questions remain concerning researcher selection, agenda-

setting, authority, and the distribution of recognition and rewards across institutional contexts. Against this backdrop, this study examines researchers' experiences of institutional power in collaborative research between UB and BITRI, exploring how selection processes, governance structures, recognition systems, and epistemic authority shape collaboration within Botswana's research system. Guided by an interpretivist-phenomenological approach and informed by Organisational Power Theory and World-Systems Theory, the study illuminates how institutional inequalities are produced, negotiated, and experienced within intra-country research partnerships.

The article delineates three principal contributions to the literature concerning research administration and collaborative governance. Firstly, it broadens discussions on research inequality beyond the predominant North-South paradigms by illustrating the reproduction of institutional hierarchies within national research systems in the Global South. Secondly, it provides empirically grounded evidence from Botswana, a context that remains underrepresented in scholarship on research collaboration. Thirdly, the article enhances the research administration discourse by emphasising how governance structures, organisational authority, and institutional positioning can influence the practical realities of collaborative research.

2. Literature Review

Research collaboration has become an increasingly dominant feature of contemporary knowledge production, particularly in higher education and research institutions seeking to address complex scientific and societal challenges. Within research administration discourse, collaboration is widely promoted as a mechanism to enhance productivity, strengthen institutional capacity, facilitate knowledge exchange, and improve research visibility. However, emerging scholarship increasingly suggests that collaborative research may not be a neutral or inherently equitable process. Rather, it appears structured by institutional power, governance arrangements, organisational hierarchies, and unequal distributions of authority, which shape participation, decision-making, recognition, and access to resources. Although research collaboration is often celebrated in policy discourse as mutually beneficial and intellectually enriching, empirical scholarship often reveals persistent inequalities embedded in collaborative arrangements. Much of the literature on research collaboration has focused on North-South partnerships, where funding asymmetries, agenda-setting authority, authorship inequalities, and epistemic dominance have frequently been documented (Crawford et al., 2021; Moyo Okwaro & Geissler, 2015). Researchers from the Global South frequently occupy subordinate roles, contributing technical labour and contextual knowledge while exercising limited influence over conceptual design, publication, and research

dissemination. These patterns may generate sustained critiques regarding neo-colonial knowledge production and unequal scholarly partnerships. Despite these contributions, limited scholarly attention has been directed toward intra-country research collaboration, particularly within the Global South. Existing scholarship tends to assume that collaborations within the same national context are naturally more equitable due to shared political, institutional, and socio-cultural environments (Mattsson, Vico, and Sälö, 2023). However, this assumption may obscure how institutional differentiation, organisational mandates, and unequal access to research capital shape collaborative dynamics within national research systems. As a result, there may remain insufficient understanding of how institutional power operates between collaborating institutions located within the same country.

2.1 Researcher Selection and Institutional Access to Collaboration

Researcher selection constitutes an important but often underexamined dimension of collaborative research governance. Existing studies suggest that participation in collaborative projects is rarely random; rather, it is mediated by professional reputation, disciplinary expertise, prior experience, and access to academic networks (Wagner, Whetsell and Mukherjee, 2019; Eberle et al., 2021). Research conducted in Namibia suggested that researchers were commonly selected based on expertise, experience, knowledge, and professional networks, underscoring the influence of both formal and informal mechanisms on access to collaboration. However, while competence-based criteria are frequently emphasised, selection processes often privilege senior, visible, and institutionally central researchers,, thereby reproducing inequalities in participation and influence(Katz and Matter, 2017; Li et al., 2022).

Bibliometric studies further suggest that institutional location and proximity to funding structures are posited to strongly influence collaborative opportunities. Researchers embedded in universities or institutions with stronger international linkages are more likely to access externally funded collaborations and occupy leadership positions (Pouris and Ho, 2014; Onyanha, 2021). Yet existing scholarship appears to have afforded insufficient scholarly attention to the operationalisation of researcher selection as a mechanism of institutional power, particularly within collaborations instantiated between universities and applied research institutions. Consequently, selection remains insufficiently theorised as a governance process that allocates authority and shapes downstream opportunities for agenda influence, authorship, and recognition.

2.2 Agenda-Setting and the Politics of Research Priorities

Agenda-setting represents another critical site through which institutional power is exercised in collaborative research. Although research agendas are commonly framed as strategic tools for identifying scientific priorities and coordinating research activity, they are also inherently political processes shaped by power, resource control, and institutional authority. The World Health Organisation (WHO) conceptualises research agendas as instruments for directing scientific effort toward pressing societal challenges while incorporating stakeholder engagement and public needs. Yet scholarship increasingly suggests that agenda-setting authority is clustered around actors exercising control over financial resources, infrastructure, and project leadership (WHO, 2025; Atenas et al., 2020).

The extant literature consistently indicates that research priorities are rarely neutral or collectively negotiated. Rather, funding agencies, senior academics, and institutional leaders frequently shape research direction through proposal development, grant mechanisms, and strategic institutional mandates (Meyer et al., 2023; Kochanek et al., 2014). Consequently, researchers who participate early in proposal conceptualisation are often positioned to define research questions, methodologies, and expected outputs, while those included later assume implementation-oriented roles. Existing studies have predominantly examined these inequalities within international partnerships; however, empirical inquiry has minimally elucidated the experiential manifestation of agenda-setting power within national research systems and among institutions occupying divergent organisational positions.

2.3 Governance Structures and Collaborative Research Dynamics

Collaborative research is also shaped by organisational governance structures that regulate decision-making, labour allocation, reporting obligations, and accountability mechanisms. Existing scholarship suggests that collaboration is mediated not only through intellectual exchange but also through managerial and bureaucratic arrangements. Research from Southern Africa elucidates how collaborative processes are influenced by funding requirements, institutional mandates, administrative procedures, and donor accountability frameworks (Sapwe, 2022; NCRST, 2024). These governance arrangements tend to shape who participates meaningfully, who exercises authority, and whose labour remains visible within collaborative teams.

European scholarship offers further elucidation regarding the governance of collaboration, indicating that formal structures of participation frequently coexist with hierarchical distributions of authority. Studies suggest that collaborative projects tend to privilege principal investigators, senior scholars, and institutions with stronger reputational capital, while junior researchers frequently report constrained influence over decision-making and limited

recognition for contributions (Dusdal and Powell, 2021; Kwiek, 2021). Thus, collaboration may emerge not merely as a flat or egalitarian arrangement, but rather as a structured organisational field, thereby reinforcing the imperative of examining governance as a mechanism of power.

2.4 Recognition, Authorship, and Epistemic Inequality

A growing body of literature elucidates the production of uneven systems of recognition and symbolic reward within collaborative research. Although collaboration frequently offers benefits such as skills development, professional networking, and access to infrastructure, these gains may not invariably translate into authorship, career advancement, or professional visibility. Studies across both the Global North and the Global South indicate that applied and technical labour is often undervalued relative to conceptual or intellectual contributions; consequently, publication and authorship tend to remain concentrated among senior or institutionally privileged actors (Kuld and O'Hagan, 2018; Crawford et al., 2021).

Control over data analysis, dissemination, and publication further reinforces epistemic inequality. Researchers who collect data but lack influence over interpretation often become positioned as technical contributors rather than recognised knowledge producers. This dynamic has been widely documented in North–South collaborations but remains underexplored within domestic partnerships in Africa. Consequently, important questions may persist regarding how recognition systems and symbolic authority are experienced in intra-country collaborative research environments.

2.5 Research Gap and Positioning of the Study

Taken together, the existing literature demonstrates that collaborative research is shaped by unequal relations of power, governance, and recognition. Nevertheless, three critical lacunae persist within this corpus. First, most research has concentrated on international North–South partnerships, leaving intra-country institutional inequalities underexamined. Second, existing scholarship has afforded insufficient consideration to researchers' experiential manifestations of institutional power, particularly as mediated by selection, agenda-setting, governance, and recognition processes. Third, a paucity of research has undertaken a comparative examination of collaborative experiences across disparate organisational settings, such as universities and research institutes, within an identical national context.

This study addresses these gaps by examining researchers' experiences of institutional power in collaborative research between the University of Botswana (UB) and the Botswana Institute for Technology Research and Innovation (BITRI). Utilising an interpretivist–phenomenological design, this investigation elucidates the mechanisms by which institutional location

influences researcher selection, the allocation of agenda-setting authority, the establishment of governance arrangements, the structure of recognition systems, and the facilitation of epistemic participation. Consequently, this inquiry contributes substantively to research administration scholarship by reframing collaboration as a structured organisational process, demonstrably shaped by power dynamics and institutional hierarchy, rather than an inherently egalitarian practice.

3. Methodology

The present investigation utilised an interpretivist qualitative methodology to elucidate researchers' experiences of institutional power within collaborative research initiatives involving the University of Botswana (UB) and the Botswana Institute for Technology Research and Innovation (BITRI). Given the study's focus on power, governance, recognition, and institutional inequality, a qualitative approach was deemed particularly efficacious, primarily owing to the socially constructed, context-dependent, and experientially embedded nature of these phenomena, thereby rendering their direct observation or quantitative measurement less feasible. Consequently, this inquiry aimed to comprehend the processes through which researchers interpret, negotiate, and construct meaning from collaborative research endeavours within their respective institutional settings.

3.1 Research Paradigm and Design

The investigation was predicated on an interpretivist philosophical paradigm, which asserts that social reality is multifaceted, socially constructed, and shaped by human interaction. From an interpretivist standpoint, institutional processes, encompassing collaboration, governance, authority, and recognition, are not immutable or objectively established; rather, their experiential manifestation varies depending on institutional location, professional role, and positional authority. This paradigm, therefore, proved particularly suitable for the investigation, as it notably facilitated an exploration into how researchers themselves may comprehend and experience the dynamics of institutional power within collaborative research arrangements.

Concomitant with this philosophical orientation, the investigation adopted a qualitative phenomenological research design. The selection of phenomenology stemmed from its capacity to facilitate an understanding of researchers' lived experiences pertaining to collaboration and the meanings they ascribe to participation, agenda-setting, governance, recognition, and institutional hierarchy. Rather than conceptualising collaboration as merely a formal administrative arrangement, the phenomenological design enabled a deeper investigation of the mechanisms by which collaboration is enacted and experientially manifested in everyday professional practice. This approach

was thus particularly appropriate for examining subtle forms of institutional power that may not be readily discernible from formal policies or organisational structures alone.

3.2 Study Context and Participants

The study was conducted at the University of Botswana (UB) and the Botswana Institute for Technology Research and Innovation (BITRI), two institutions that occupy distinct yet interconnected positions within Botswana's national research system. UB functions primarily as a comprehensive academic institution focused on knowledge production, scholarly outputs, and higher education, whereas BITRI operates as a mission-oriented research institute emphasising applied research, innovation, and national development priorities. The examination of collaboration across these institutional settings facilitated the elucidation of how organisational mandates and institutional positioning might shape collaborative experiences and the dynamics of authority.

A total of twenty-five (25) researchers participated in the study. Participants were purposively selected based on their active or prior involvement in collaborative research projects at UB and BITRI. Purposive sampling was employed to ensure the inclusion of information-rich participants who could provide detailed, reflective accounts of collaborative research processes. Rather than seeking statistical representativeness, the sampling strategy prioritised experiential relevance, institutional diversity, and direct engagement with collaborative research. The final sample size was guided by the principle of data saturation, in which additional interviews yielded no substantively new insights or thematic variation.

3.3 Data Collection

Data were collected through semi-structured interviews, which served as the primary method of inquiry. Semi-structured interviewing was selected because it enabled consistency across participants while also allowing sufficient flexibility to explore complex and sensitive issues related to institutional power, agenda-setting, governance, recognition, and collaboration dynamics. The interview format allowed participants to articulate their experiences in their own words and enabled probing for clarification, reflection, and deeper contextual understanding. Interviews focused on four broad domains corresponding to the study's research questions: researcher selection and contracting, agenda-setting processes, collaborative governance dynamics, and researchers' lived experiences of collaboration.

Ethical principles guided all stages of data collection. Participants were recruited voluntarily, informed consent was obtained prior to participation, and confidentiality and anonymity were maintained throughout the research

process. To protect participants' identities, pseudonymous participant identifiers (e.g., RP1, RP2) were used during analysis and reporting. The study also maintained reflexive sensitivity to the institutional and professional dynamics that could shape participants' willingness to discuss sensitive issues related to power and inequality.

4. Data Analysis

Interview data were analysed using thematic analysis supported by NVivo qualitative data analysis software. Thematic analysis was chosen because it provided a systematic and rigorous framework for identifying recurring patterns, meanings, and variations across participants' accounts. Analysis proceeded iteratively through several stages, including data familiarisation, open coding, theme generation, refinement, and interpretation. Codes and themes were developed inductively from participants' narratives and informed deductively by the study's theoretical framework and research questions.

The analysis was further informed by Organisational Power Theory and World-Systems Theory, which provided complementary analytical lenses for interpreting researchers' experiences. Organisational Power Theory enabled examination of how authority, governance structures, and organisational hierarchies shape participation and influence within collaborative projects. World-Systems Theory provided a broader explanatory framework for understanding how institutional inequalities and epistemic hierarchies are reproduced within national research systems, even among institutions located within the same country. The integration of these theories deepened the study's analysis by connecting researchers' lived experiences to broader institutional and structural dynamics.

5. Discussion

The findings of this study suggest that institutional power constitutes the organising principle of collaborative research between the University of Botswana (UB) and the Botswana Institute for Technology Research and Innovation (BITRI). Rather than functioning as an egalitarian partnership grounded in shared intellectual authority, collaboration emerges as a structured social process shaped by institutional location, governance arrangements, and differential proximity to resources. Across the four domains examined: researcher selection, agenda-setting authority, governance structures, and systems of recognition, power is shown to operate not episodically but systematically, shaping who participates, who influences, whose labour is valued, and whose knowledge acquires legitimacy. These findings suggest that epistemic inequality is reproduced intra-nationally, even within collaborations situated in the same national context.

5.1 Institutional Power and Researcher Selection as the First Site of Inequality

The findings reveal that institutional power is embedded at the earliest stage of collaboration through mechanisms of researcher selection and contracting. Entry into collaborative research differed substantially between UB and BITRI. At the University of Botswana, participation was commonly associated with academic standing, involvement in proposal development, and established scholarly networks, whereas at the Botswana Institute for Technology Research and Innovation, participation largely followed managerial assignment after funding approval. These contrasting pathways suggest that researcher selection is not a neutral administrative process but an institutional mechanism through which authority and influence are distributed from the outset. Researchers engaged during proposal conceptualisation are more likely to acquire intellectual ownership of a project's strategic direction, whereas those incorporated later are often positioned primarily as implementers. In this regard, the findings extend existing scholarship on collaborative research, which has predominantly focused on inequalities in authorship, funding, and agenda-setting (Flint et al., 2022), by demonstrating that collaborative hierarchies may be institutionalised before formal partnerships commence.

From an administrative perspective, the findings further suggest that collaborative inequities are not merely incidental outcomes of interpersonal dynamics but are embedded within organisational systems governing inclusion and participation. The recurrent circulation of established UB academics within collaborative networks appears to reproduce cumulative advantage, whereas BITRI's managerial deployment model may constrain opportunities for intellectual leadership among applied researchers. Institutional power is exercised subtly through formal procedures and informal norms that privilege recognised scholarly capital, proposal ownership, and managerial hierarchy. Consequently, researcher selection functions not only as recruitment but also as epistemic gatekeeping, shaping who gains authority to define knowledge and who remains confined to technical execution. Collaboration, therefore, may perpetuate stratified participation, with implications for downstream authority, recognition, and professional advancement.

5.2 Agenda-Setting Authority and the Centralisation of Intellectual Control

The findings suggest that agenda-setting authority constitutes a key mechanism through which institutional power is consolidated within collaborative research. Although collaborative meetings, committees, and partnership structures formally exist, substantive decision-making remains concentrated among actors positioned closest to funding streams and

proposal initiation. Researchers affiliated with UB, particularly principal investigators, reported greater influence during proposal conceptualisation, whereas BITRI researchers consistently described their involvement as largely consultative and implementation-oriented. Consequently, participation was often perceived less as shared governance and more as procedural inclusion with limited decision-making authority. These findings challenge technocratic assumptions that collaboration inherently promotes collective decision-making, instead suggesting that research priorities are shaped by institutional positioning, resource dependency, and proximity to funding ownership.

At the same time, the findings complicate simplistic assumptions of institutional dominance by demonstrating that UB's agenda-setting authority is itself constrained by broader funding logics. While UB researchers exercise comparatively greater influence than their BITRI counterparts, external funders continue to shape thematic priorities and strategic boundaries. Institutional power, therefore, operates at multiple levels, internally through organisational hierarchy and externally through funding dependency, rendering collaboration less a horizontal process of shared intellectual engagement than a layered hierarchy of authority in which intellectual control remains centralised among proposal initiators, fund-holders, and strategically positioned actors.

5.3 Governance Structures and the Administrative Reproduction of Hierarchy

The findings pertaining to collaborative governance suggest that institutional authority is routinised through administrative structures, reporting regimes, and bureaucratic procedures. Participants consistently reported that collaboration was administratively intensive, necessitating substantial reporting, coordination, and compliance; however, operational inefficiencies were not viewed as the principal challenge, but rather, governance arrangements themselves were interpreted by researchers as more consequential, particularly regarding the concentration of authority within hierarchical approval systems and managerial oversight.

BITRI researchers delineated multi-layered approval chains that restricted autonomy and decelerated responsiveness, whereas UB researchers, particularly principal investigators, evinced a greater degree of discretion concerning project management. Yet hierarchy remained evident even within UB, where junior academics deferred to senior scholars, especially in matters relating to publication and authorship. This finding suggests that collaborative inequality is not solely inter-institutional but also intra-institutional, reflecting layered forms of power that shape authority across institutional positions.

The significance of these findings lies in elucidating how collaborative endeavours are administratively structured through formal governance systems that normalise unequal participation. Hierarchical decision chains, differentiated autonomy, and restricted voice appear to engender a collaborative environment where participation does not necessarily translate into influence. Junior researchers' reliance on cautious communication and informal negotiation appears to elucidate the internalisation and reproduction of organisational power through quotidian interactions. Consequently, collaboration may function less as collegial peer engagement than as a managed system of compliance, wherein authority remains structurally concentrated.

These findings additionally imply that efforts to improve collaborative effectiveness through operational reforms alone are unlikely to address deeper inequities. Although administrative efficiency may alleviate procedural burdens, it does not fundamentally alter the underlying concentration of authority, which critically shapes decision-making prerogatives, communicative influence, and the valorisation of expertise. Institutional reform must therefore move beyond coordination mechanisms to address the governance architecture through which collaborative power is exercised.

5.4 Recognition Systems, Epistemic Inequality, and the Politics of Knowledge Production

Perhaps the most salient finding of the investigation pertains to the role of recognition systems in reproducing epistemic inequality. Although researchers widely acknowledged collaboration as professionally beneficial, particularly for skills acquisition, networking, and access to resources, these benefits were not consistently translated into recognition, authorship, or career advancement. Applied and technical labour, disproportionately undertaken by BITRI researchers and junior staff, was consistently undervalued within academic reward systems. Experience accumulated through collaboration seldom translated into symbolic capital, particularly where authorship and publication remained concentrated among senior or proposal-stage actors.

The distinction participants drew between skills acquisition and institutional advancement may be particularly elucidating. Collaboration could be perceived as professionally enabling yet structurally constraining. Researchers developed competence, expanded networks, and gained exposure to new methodologies, yet often remained excluded from the forms of recognition requisite for professional advancement. This disjuncture, therefore, appears to have generated frustration, reduced motivation, and heightened selectivity concerning subsequent collaborations. Collaboration thus could be perceived as paradoxical: beneficial in practical terms but unequal in symbolic terms.

Equally significant were participants' concerns regarding data ownership and interpretive authority. BITRI researchers frequently articulated their circumscribed involvement in data analysis and dissemination, despite substantial contributions to data generation and project implementation. This distinction, drawn between the generation of knowledge and its interpretation, may indeed reveal the operation of epistemic power within collaborative research. Researchers excluded from analysis and authorship assume the role of data provisioners rather than knowledge creators, reinforcing stratified patterns of scientific legitimacy. Control over interpretation may thus emerge as a central mechanism through which the reproduction of epistemic hierarchy is facilitated.

5.5 Intra-Country Epistemic Inequality and the Reproduction of Hierarchy

A major contribution of this study may suggest that epistemic inequalities in collaborative research are not confined to international North–South relations but are also reproduced within national research systems. Although UB and BITRI operate within the same country and ostensibly pursue shared developmental goals, institutional differentiation appears to generate hierarchical patterns resembling broader centre–periphery relations in global knowledge production. UB occupies a position associated with conceptual leadership, proposal authorship, and publication visibility, while BITRI is more closely aligned with technical execution and implementation. These differentiated institutional mandates may produce uneven access to symbolic and epistemic power.

This finding appears particularly significant, as it may challenge assumptions that intra-country collaboration inherently mitigates inequality. The evidence instead suggests that institutional power relations can reproduce asymmetries even in geographically proximate partnerships. Formal collaboration alone may not inherently dismantle hierarchy; rather, existing organisational structures, funding arrangements, and recognition systems often reinforce it. In this respect, collaboration potentially risks reproducing a domestic form of epistemic stratification in which some institutions define knowledge while others primarily implement it.

5.6 Concluding Discussion

Taken together, the findings indicate that institutional power in collaborative research is administratively organised through interconnected mechanisms of researcher selection, agenda-setting authority, governance structures, and recognition systems. These mechanisms operate sequentially and cumulatively, shaping who enters collaboration, who influences intellectual direction, whose voice carries authority, and whose labour receives legitimacy. In this sense, collaboration between UB and BITRI might be more accurately

understood not as a neutral partnership, but rather as a stratified organisational process embedded within institutional and epistemic hierarchies.

The study, therefore, advances a critical argument: epistemic inequality may not be solely imported from global North–South relations but may also be domestically reproduced through national institutional arrangements. Collaborative research within the same country may generate important professional and organisational benefits, yet without deliberate attention to power distribution, authority sharing, and equitable recognition, collaboration risks reinforcing rather than transforming existing inequalities. Institutional power, therefore, appears central to comprehending how collaboration is experienced, governed, and sustained within contemporary research systems

6. Conclusion

This investigation examined researchers' experiences and perceptions of collaborative research between the University of Botswana (UB) and the Botswana Institute for Technology Research and Innovation (BITRI), with particular emphasis on how institutional power shapes participation, authority, recognition, and lived experiences within intra-country research collaboration. Addressing a notable empirical gap in the literature, the study moved beyond dominant North–South perspectives to interrogate how power operates within a national research system in the Global South. Through an interpretivist-phenomenological approach involving twenty-five researchers from UB and BITRI, the study provides a sociologically grounded account of collaborative research as a structured, negotiated, and often contested institutional process.

The findings suggest that collaborative research between UB and BITRI transcends merely a technical arrangement for joint knowledge production; it functions as an organisational process imbued with power dynamics, shaped by institutional hierarchies, differentiated mandates, and disparities in access to symbolic and material resources. Throughout all four research inquiries, a consistent pattern has emerged: institutional authority markedly influences participant involvement, the shaping of research priorities, recognition of labour, and the legitimisation of knowledge. In this context, collaboration does not appear to be inherently egalitarian but is rather structured through mechanisms that may perpetuate existing inequalities.

Concerning researcher selection, the study found notable institutional variations in how participation is configured. At UB, involvement in collaborative research is largely mediated through proposal-stage participation, scholarly networks, disciplinary reputation, and academic visibility, thereby privileging researchers with established academic capital. Conversely, BITRI researchers are frequently incorporated after funding

approval through managerial assignment linked to institutional mandates, a process that prioritises technical delivery while constraining intellectual ownership and agenda-setting influence. The findings, therefore, suggest that researcher selection operates not as a neutral or purely meritocratic process but as a governance mechanism through which epistemic authority is allocated and normalised. Similarly, agenda-setting authority was found to be concentrated among actors positioned closest to funding acquisition, proposal development, and institutional leadership. Although formal consultative structures exist, participation in agenda-setting, particularly among BITRI researchers, was frequently described as symbolic rather than decision-making, suggesting that research priorities are often shaped by institutional hierarchy, strategic positioning, and funding logic rather than inclusive scholarly deliberation.

The study further demonstrates that collaborative processes are governed by organisational hierarchies that regulate authority, visibility, and participation. While operational challenges such as administrative delays and coordination burdens were acknowledged, participants consistently framed these as secondary to deeper structural inequalities embedded within governance systems. UB researchers, particularly principal investigators, generally exercised greater autonomy over project direction and outputs, whereas BITRI researchers, especially junior staff, reported constrained agency, limited decision-making power, and lengthy approval structures. Although collaboration yielded important benefits, including skills development, methodological learning, expanded networks, and access to research infrastructure, such gains did not always translate into authorship, recognition, career progression, or epistemic authority. The findings revealed a persistent disconnect between participation and professional reward, particularly for researchers engaged in technical and applied work, whose contributions frequently remained symbolically undervalued. Concerns surrounding data ownership and interpretive authority further underscore how collaboration may reproduce epistemic exclusion by positioning some researchers primarily as data producers while reserving interpretive power for others.

Theoretically, the study underscores the analytical value of integrating Organisational Power Theory and World-Systems Theory in explaining collaborative research dynamics. Organisational Power Theory illuminates how authority is institutionalised through routine mechanisms such as selection, governance structures, authorship allocation, and recognition systems (Fleming and Spicer, 2014), while World-Systems Theory contextualises these dynamics within broader structures of epistemic inequality (Demeter and Toth, 2020). Although traditionally applied to North–South asymmetries (Wallerstein, 2005), the study extends its relevance by illustrating how centre–periphery relations may be reproduced within national

research systems. In this case, UB appears to function as an epistemic centre associated with conceptual leadership and scholarly recognition, whereas BITRI occupies a more peripheral role centred on implementation and technical execution.

A central contribution of this study, therefore, lies in demonstrating that intra-country research collaboration may reproduce inequalities commonly associated with international partnerships. Rather than conceptualising collaborative asymmetry solely through geography or colonial legacy (Fellessen and Mahlck, 2017; Nkansah et al., 2024), the findings suggest that institutional mandates, governance arrangements, and unequal access to symbolic capital can generate forms of stratification comparable to those within national systems. Ultimately, the study concludes that the sustainability and effectiveness of collaborative research depend not merely on institutional convergence but on equitable governance, transparent decision-making, fair recognition systems, and meaningful participation in knowledge production. Collaboration, therefore, should not be understood as inherently virtuous but as a negotiated institutional space in which power, legitimacy, and epistemic authority remain continually contested. In this regard, meaningful partnership may depend less on procedural inclusion than on justice in participation, recognition, and knowledge ownership.

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