

Patterns of Relationships in North-South Higher Education Partnerships: A Pathway to Mutuality

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Abstract

This study explores the patterns of relationships in the North-South higher education partnerships, focusing on the experiences of the Southern partner in two cases of partnerships between universities of Ethiopia and Norway. The study employed a comparative case study, based on interviews with 40 participants (staff and students) and document reviews. Accordingly, the study maps out the formation and functioning of the partnerships, along which, compares the two cases vis-à-vis the positioning of the Southern partners. Then, it concludes that North-South higher education partnerships could be shaped not only by the structural factors but also by context-embedded factors, which are valued for challenging the problematic consequences of the inherent asymmetries and, thus, for opening up pathways to mutuality.

Keywords: higher education; partnership; North-South higher education partnership; mutuality; Ethiopia; higher education partnership

Introduction

North-South higher education partnership (HEP) has become increasingly seen as a means of revitalizing African higher education, and partnership initiatives involving African higher education have proliferated (Kot, 2015; Teferra, 2014). In line with these developments, Ethiopian higher education institutions (HEIs) have engaged in partnerships with many Northern HEIs (Teferra, 2014). This study focuses on examining international HEP experiences in Ethiopia using two partnership programs formed between universities in Ethiopia and in Norway. The study's focus on the partnerships with the Norwegian HEIs is because they are among those which have long partnership experience (more than 28 years) with Ethiopian HEIs (Nossun, 2016). Moreover, such partnerships could be viewed as North-South relation that leads to a question of power relation, while Norway's persistent claim for its rationale behind its development assistance is humanitarianism (Hydén, 2016; Ishengoma, 2016). Yet, it is not known how far this claim practically conforms to and opens up spaces for the Southern institutions to exercise a relationship beyond asymmetry.

Partnership as a concept often suggests a positive and collaborative relationship based on mutually reached agreements from which all parties gain benefits (Koehn & Obamba, 2014; Wannan et al., 2010). It lies on the premise of mutual influence, co-ownership, joint decisions, mutual respect and trust, and mutual benefits. However, the degree to which such North-South HEPs reflect a

pattern of equitable participation and mutual influence remains uncertain. Broadly speaking, positive and negative images are reflected in previous literature on the North-South HEP. While an array of researches reported that such partnerships are shaped by the inherent power asymmetries (e.g., Andriansen & Madsen, 2019; Bailey & Dolan, 2011; Ishengoma, 2016), there are also arguments on the prospects that the North-South partnerships manifest symmetry and mutual influence (Koehn & Obamba, 2014; Leng, 2016; Mwangi, 2017). The positive image emphasizes on the benefits, and views international partnerships as the venues for higher education development. Studies in this category hold the promise of improving partners' academic and research capacity, mutuality, and share of knowledge and skills (e.g., Jamil & Haque, 2016; Jooste, 2015; Koehn & Obamba, 2014). They depict the possibilities of realizing the Southern partners' equitable influence over the partnership through real negotiation and consensus. Studies in this category are overly optimistic to mutuality, downplaying the role of issues of structural power in shaping the relationships.

However, the other category of literature is sceptical of the partnership premises and shows a negative or a gloomier picture. Studies in this category tend to explain the North-South partnership dynamics from the perspective of structural factors (e.g. Bailey & Dolan, 2011; Ishengoma, 2016). They view such partnerships as a more subtle form of power imposition and a means of legitimating the role of the Northern development agencies in directing the relationship. Based on these studies, the partnership programs are often operated within the neo-colonial structure, which leads the Southern universities to dependency, facilitates the dominance of Northern interests, and distorts local agendas. In this perspective, the promise of egalitarianism in the partnership tends to be challenged by the inherent North-South asymmetries and the Northern academics' paternalistic behaviours (Ishengoma, 2016). Such studies tend to overestimate the hegemony of the political and economic structures in shaping the partnership dynamics. However, I argue that international HEPs do not necessarily be formed and operate in the same way and exhibit the same patterns. Depending on the actual context (Ledger & Kawalilak, 2020), one can envisage, some ways, beyond structural asymmetries. Yet, most studies in this area are based on the Northern perspectives and by the Northern scholars (Koehn & Obamba, 2014; Kot, 2015). Studies based on the Southern viewpoints on how far their voices are included in building and maintaining a partnership that can work within the tenacious asymmetries of power are scarce (Ibid). Particularly, although many HEIs of Ethiopia have been engaged in partnerships with their Northern counterparts, there are only agency-sponsored evaluation reports and few studies (e.g., Francisconi et al., 2011; Kassie & Angervall, 2021).

Thus, this study is about the Southern partners' experiences on the North-South HEPs involving two Ethiopian universities (hereafter referred to by UA and UB) and a Norwegian university (referred to as NU). Two cases of partnership programs (UA-NU and UB-NU) are at the centre of this study to understand the patterns of relationships exhibited vis-à-vis issues of mutuality.

Specifically, the study explores: (a) how these partnerships are formed and functioning, (b) how the Southern partners view their experiences in these partnerships in light of their positioning, and (c) compares the two cases and draws salient lessons which are valued in establishing partnerships that can work within, and go beyond, asymmetries.

Without ignoring the structural conception of North-South relations, this study adds the context-embedded aspects for better understanding the complex nature of the partnership and shows the possibilities of challenging the problematic consequences of structural asymmetries. It also provides implications, particularly, for advancing mutuality in the partnership.

Theoretical framework

Although different actors may take up a dominant or subordinate role within the global power structure, this structure, however, is not an entirely deterministic explanation of international relations, as societies are heterogeneous and subjected to constant change (Stein, 2019). Hence, a particular international partnership should be considered not only through critical awareness of historically-embedded political and economic relations that constitutes asymmetries but also in view of contextual sensitivity. Most importantly, this study focuses on NORAD (Norwegian Development Agency) supported partnerships, where NORAD imagined shared responsibility and mutual relationships between Norwegian and African universities (Norad, 2014; Nossun, 2016). Thus, the mutuality lens (Galtung, 1980; Hayhoe, 1986), appears to be a suitable theoretical frame to understand the relationship patterns in these partnerships. Mutuality is viewed as the opposite of domination (Galtung, 1980), and thus as a key dimension of relationship. Hayhoe (1986) has adapted Galtung's structural-oriented goals of international relations: equity, participation, autonomy, and solidarity; she conceptualized these structural-oriented goals to reduce power differentials and promote mutuality in international cooperation. Mutuality has also been employed by other scholars (e.g., Leng, 2016; Leng & Pan, 2013; Mwangi, 2017) for studying North-South HEPs.

From the context of North-South HEP, *equity* emphasizes that partnerships arrangements and their objectives are formulated by partners collaboratively with joint-agreement and consensus (Hayhoe, 1986; Leng, 2016). *Equity* supports collaborative decision-making, shared responsibilities, and mutual benefits (Ibid). *Participation* suggests an approach that assumes full engagement and contribution of the Southern partner in the partnership (Hayhoe, 1986; Mwangi, 2017). *Participation* rejects restriction and hierarchical relations. *Autonomy* emphasizes that partners respect each other's values, norms, and working cultures (Mwangi, 2017). This requires that the Northern partners recognize the Southern partner's contributions and the benefits from the partnership (Leng, 2016). *Solidarity* suggests partnership forms that encourage strong interactions between partners, and that facilitate further interconnections amongst the Southern partners and

members (Ibid). This mutuality frame is, thus, used as a lens for comparatively examining the two partnerships with respect to the Southern partners' roles and positioning in shaping the relationship.

Design and Method

This study employs a comparative case study design. This design is helpful for an in-depth understanding of the experiences of the two partnerships, treating each as a case (Yin, 2011), and then comparing the two cases for better-understanding nuances between them (Bryman, 2012). Two partnership programs, UA-NU and UB-NU were selected from 11 partnerships involving universities of Ethiopia and Norway. Their contextual similarities and differences were used as criteria for selecting comparable cases (Mwangi, 2017). Both cases involved 'first generation' universities (UA and UB) which are assumed to have better partnership experience, focused on capacity building; funded by NORAD, and had similar project periods, from 2013 to 2020. Such cases are comparable, as they share common goals (Goodrick, 2014) and have commonalities in terms of data sources and constructs (Steiner-Khamsi, 2002). Yet, they vary in partnership areas and activities and institutional capacity, which may or may not account for differences in their relationship pattern.

The study involved semi-structured interviews with 40 (20 from each case) purposefully selected staff (six administrative and 18 academics) and graduate students (12 PhD and two Master's students), who had better experience in the partnerships. The interviews with the administrators focused on their roles in initiating, scrutinizing, and approving the partnership. Interviews with academics focused on how they see their role and experience in the partnership related to their foreign partners. Interviews with graduate students focused on their experience and benefits from the partnership. Here, most of the PhD students were also academic staff and they had participated in the early partnership establishment process before they started their studies. Interview data were supplemented by reviews of documents (MOUs, agreements, partnership proposals, progress reports, and minutes).

Data analysis involved reviews of documents, followed by analysis of interview data. First, documents were reviewed and data were obtained regarding partnership objectives, activities, funding source, partners' roles and responsibilities and contributions, progresses, achievements, and challenges. From these data emerged the following themes: partnership initiation, formation, and functioning, which fed into capturing the general picture of the study's major concerns. Next, data collected through interviews were integrated with document data, and coded with respect to themes that emerged in document review. Herein, the analysis involved single case analysis—where each was explored and described along with the emerged themes—followed by cross-case analysis, where results were synthesized across the two cases and juxtaposed (see Appendices). Finally, through constant comparison (Yin, 2011), data were coded with respect to constructs:

equity, autonomy, solidarity, and participation emerged from the framework and interview guides and compared across the cases. Accordingly, the study synthesized similarities and identified nuances between cases, vis-à-vis issues of mutuality. Specific interviews are referred by a number following UA and UB that denote universities.

Major findings

This section provides the results, first presenting the overview of the two partnership programs, juxtaposed (Appendix-A), then following the cross-case analysis.

How are the partnerships initiated and formed?

The findings indicate that previous personal and institutional links and NORAD's call for funding have contributed to the initiation of UA-NU partnership, while the initiation of UB-NU partnership was linked to previous personal relations and NORAD's call for funding. As the then coordinator in UA responded:

Our relationship with [NU] professors started earlier in a research partnership where we worked together... They informed us about NORAD's announcement of funding applications. Then, we contacted them and discussed the development of a joint proposal and application for funding (UA5).

A coordinator in UB also described:

Prior to this partnership, there was a capacity-building partnership between [UB] and the U.S. institution, where I from [UB] and a professor from the U.S. side (now a coordinator of this partnership in the Norwegian side) were members. It was at that time we discussed the possibilities of partnering. Later, through our initiation, our respective officials signed MOUs for working in partnership (UB25).

An administrator from UB added:

After MOUs and in response to NORAD's call for a seed grant application, we jointly applied for the seed grant. In late 2012, we won the seed grant. Using this grant, we identified our institutional needs and developed the partnership proposal; and again in 2013, we won the NORAD's main grant (UB23).

In both cases, initial contacts and conversations between partners were initiated through the faculty members who had prior links with members of the foreign partners. These members were then appointed as coordinators in their respective institutions. Here, both prior personal and institutional

links served as seed stock for the initiation and emergence of new partnerships (as also observed in Taylor, 2016), especially for facilitating initial awareness and understandings of partners' interest in partnerships and sign MOUs. However, it is noted in both cases that it was in response to NORAD's call for an application that partners decided to make need assessments, identify and set partnership agendas, and develop the partnership proposal. Interviewees (e.g., UA15 and UB37) also underscored that securing external funding is the prerequisite to put MOUs into practice and for running the project, which otherwise would be left on shelves. The UB-NU partnership proposal (p.3) also underlined the contribution of the NORAD's Seed Grant for "...need assessment and development of the proposal..." This indicates that although prior links are important at the very start, a call for external funding appeared to be determinant for deciding proposal development and thus for establishing the partnerships.

Several participants in both cases also mentioned that their institutions often partner with the Northern institutions. One reason for this is their expectation that working with the Northern partners, owing to their better status and experience, would give them a "better opportunity to learn a lot and realize [their] capacity building goal" (UA1). The other reason is to ensure "external funding for running the partnership project" (UB29), for it is mostly when they partner with the Northern partners that they secure funding. Related to this, participants frequently praised Norwegian's financial contributions for organizing consultative meetings and exchange visits for furthering understanding of each other's needs and contributions. Such communications through meetings were underscored as "...instrumental for the partnership formation ..." (UA-NU proposal, p.4), and were valued to "broaden the liaison" between partners (UB-NU proposal, p.3).

In addition, several participants described that they have been given the autonomy to assess and identify the needs of their own institutions to be addressed in the partnership. For example, an academic staff from UA said, "They requested us our interests and needs. We told them and discussed. Then, they accepted us with slight modifications" (UA5). Similarly, it is described that NU gave precedence to the demands of UB.

First, the selected staff from our institution identified the partnership agenda and developed the draft partnership proposal. Then, the draft proposal was presented in the meeting where other academics and institutional leaders of both parties participated by providing feedback. Accordingly, the proposal was modified. Finally, institutional leaders approved and signed the agreement (UB29).

In both cases, the local partners have participated in identifying issues of local relevance, in proposal writing, and in vetting the processes and signing agreements (UA18, UA4, UB37, UB36). As such the partnership proposals entertain the needs of the local partners. Both the interview and the document indicated that the partnerships focused on building the capacity of the local

institution through graduate training, joint-research, curriculum design, and short-term training. The proposals, in both cases, also underlined the shortage of academic staff and resources in the local partners, which the partnerships are supposed to address. Hence, the partnership initiation and formation in both cases seem to have demonstrated a practice, somewhat, different from the traditional partnerships which are often initiated externally by the Northern partners (Ishengoma, 2016).

In both cases, NORAD didn't directly participate in the construction and execution of the partnerships. Yet, the two case studies show that the partnership building was also in consideration of NORAD's requirements and procedures, which contributed to shaping partners' role in setting agenda, goals, and activities, and in sharing roles and responsibilities. As a funding body, NORAD invited interested Southern and Norwegian universities to establish partnerships and apply for funding awards. The selection of proposals was, undeniably, linked to NORAD's criteria, such as relevance to NORAD's objectives and thematic areas, local institution's needs and capacity, gender inclusiveness and equity, sustainability, and cost-effectiveness (Norad, n.d. pp. 10-11, 17). Participants from both UA and UB viewed most of these criteria as worthwhile in entertaining local priorities and balancing partners' roles while considering some others as sponsor stipulations that tend to distort local priorities. They raised concerns that NORAD's focus on gender equity has influenced the local partners to include "recruitment of 50% female PhD candidates" as part of the partnership project. For example, UB30 emphasized that although gender issue was in line with their institutional needs, this recruitment procedure didn't conform with the existing context, as female academics with MA degrees were scarce "let alone those who were suitable for PhD candidate." The inclusion of female recruitment in the UA-NU partnership was also described as linked to the local partner's desire for winning the grant.

Although the foreign partner encourages you to design a project that meets your priorities, also you need to consider the funding body's priorities to compete for and win the funding. Or else you may lose competition (UA7).

Since gender equity, particularly in academic positions, is a salient problem in many African HEIs including Ethiopia (Kassie, 2018; Teferra et al., 2018), it sounds commendable that NORAD's requirements and incentives positively influence the Southern partners (UA & UB) to employ such female recruitment procedure. However, this is applied only in NORAD-supported projects. As to the interview, had this recruitment procedure been valued by the local partners, it would have been employed across all programs. However, it remained as a slack appendage to particular partnerships to get access to NORAD's funding, rather than bringing about real institutional reforms. Although the Norwegians gave the local partners the autonomy to identify their own needs, the local partners were well aware of the Norwegian's strong drive for gender equity and they tended to respond to it at the cost of their felt needs and urgent priorities. This reflects the

influence of conditionality attached funding in setting the partnership agenda (Andriansen & Madsen, 2019; Ishengoma, 2016).

The two cases also revealed that share of responsibilities between partners was based on discussions and agreements but also in consideration of qualifications and experiences. For example, UB25 said, “All arrangements and decisions are based on mutual agreements.” Yet, the agreement was also based on the presumption that the local staff would “take a leading role in tasks that they can do”, while the foreign staff “take the lead in those tasks that the [local partner] can’t do” (UA5). Accordingly, partners in both cases were assumed both joint and individual responsibilities, as summarized and attached in Appendix-B. Herein, the allegedly higher-skilled NU staff, for the most part, was assigned to play mentoring and assisting roles and to empower the local staff through experience sharing, offering capacity-building training, and providing access to educational facilities. While the local partners’ relatively ‘lower’ qualifications and experiences have positioned them in need of their Norwegian partner’s assistance. Participants unanimously expressed the lack of academic and research capacities and experiences as the major reasons behind their engagement in the partnerships. For example, UA9 commented, “...[the Norwegian partners] are by far in better status than us, and that we need to learn from them... adopt their work.” However, it appears that the apparent difference in qualifications and experience has continued to determine partners’ positioning and thus challenged efforts towards equity in the share of roles and responsibilities (Andriansen & Madsen, 2019; Menashy, 2018).

Although the two cases had many similarities, they also displayed nuances in balances of distribution of roles and responsibilities between partners, in that, the UA-NU partnership, related to UB-NU, reflects a fairly balanced role distribution. This is, mainly, due to differences in partnership modalities and activities they employed (see Appendix-B). In the UA-NU partnership, the major partnership activities were PhD training, joint-research, community engagement, short-term training, and MA curriculum design. The PhD program was hosted in the local partner (UA) where professors from both UA and NU jointly run course offerings and supervision. The UA members, like their NU colleagues, were also assigned to participate in all other partnership activities. On the other hand, the major activities in the UB-NU partnership were ‘sandwich’ PhD and MPhil programs, short-term training, and MPhil curriculum design. The sandwich model is a kind of scholarship offered to UB students to follow their study in both NU and UB. Thus, NU was assigned to run the PhD program i.e., admission, degree awarding, and course offering and supervision. This was because UB didn’t have “staff with the required qualification to run PhD training” (UB26). Moreover, unlike in the UA-NU partnership, there was no joint-research in UB-NU that could have involved local faculty members and “... contributed to research-capacity building [at UB]” (UB21). Consequently, UB members, compared to their NU colleagues, were assigned to participate in limited activities, reflecting asymmetric role distribution.

The study further showed (Appendix-B) that the development of the UA-NU partnership followed a bottom-up path, whereby the partnership was formed and operated at the department (operating academic unit) in which department members have “involved in the partnership establishment”, starting from initiation through design to implementation (UA6). However, the UB-NU partnership appears to have followed a top-down path, whereby the selection and design of partnership activities took place at the college level with minimal participation of the allegedly operating units in certain partnership activities. Participants (e.g., UB21, an administrator) frequently claimed that the UB-NU partnership was conceptualized and designed at the college level by the respective heads, “without the involvement of members of departments.” And that the role and level of participation of operating members in UB in the planning process were relatively low, compared to that of UA. Given that the focus of the partnership is capacity building of the local partner, minimal participation of members of the local partner may limit the knowledge transfer and thereby undermine the capacity-building efforts (Andriansen & Madsen, 2019; Ishengoma, 2016).

How are the partnerships functioning?

The two case studies indicated that the operation process depends much on the initial partnership conceptualization and building stage. An interesting example is that the MPhil program, which was proposed “without adequate involvement and agreement of the [operating] department” (UB30), has remained impractical (UB-NU Progress report, p.7). The interview also revealed a divergence between the academics and the coordinator on the relevance of this (MPhil) program. For example, while the coordinator insisted on its relevance for addressing gaps in research arguing as “it is research-driven”, academics (e.g., UB27 & UB28) argued that joint-research would have been preferable to the MPhil program for enhancing research skill and experience. Such partnerships that lack common understandings amongst partner members on detailed contents and activities tend to be unsuccessful (Sutton & Obst, 2011).

A slight distinction was also noted between the two cases regarding the roles the local partners played in the recruitment of PhD candidates. In UA-NU partnership, PhD students’ recruitment was, “primarily, carried out by [UA]” (UA4). In the case of UB-NU partnership, although UB participated in the recruitment process, candidates were “scrutinized as per NU’s admission criteria” (UB25). As such, on one hand, UA-NU partnership, compared to UB-NU partnership, appears to have given the local partner a role that enhances local ownership. On the other hand, the foreign partners’ selection and admission criteria applied in the case of UB-NU partnership are perceived to raise international standards.

Regarding the financial administration, unlike the traditional North-South partnership that places control of the project finance in the hands of the Northern actors (Ishengoma, 2016; Teferra, 2014),

the two cases seem to reflect a slightly different practice that involves the local actors in financial administration and management. As the agreements in both partnerships stated, NORAD disburses the money to partners as per the financial needs agreed, upon request by the recipient (local partner). The recipient is given “the administrative responsibilities for allocating its share, accounting, and reporting the transactions to NORAD” (UB-NU Partnership Agreement, p.2). Such efforts were valued by participants (e.g. UA14 and UB24) in bringing about some level of equity in fund distribution and control. Participants also highlighted the flexibility in budget allocation, in that “NORAD allows budget deviations whenever necessary” (UA6). For example, both partnerships were able to be extended by two year funding period to complete the delayed activities. Yet, the issue of financial administration and control remained a point of debate. For example, one administrator argued that although NU is not delegated as a gatekeeper of the project finance, “yet...it is under the control of NORAD” (UA1). An academic staff added, “Your expenditure needs to be in the budget line and you need to report to NORAD” (UB22). On one hand, this reflects more control of the budget by the funding body that tends to lead the local partners in a dependent position (Alemu, 2019). On the other hand, such practices could be valued to promote transparency and accountability in budget utilization.

The study also displayed unbalanced fund distribution, in favor of the foreign partner. As stated in UB-NU and UA-NU agreements, 79% of the UB-NU partnership budget and 63% of the UA-NU partnership budget remained in the foreign partner. This difference in fund distribution between the two cases may be due to the UB-NU partnership major activities being managed by NU staff whose remuneration was costly compared to the local staff, and the absence of joint-research that could have brought more budget.

The two case studies also reveal challenges and tensions related to financial administration. Some of these were related to the local institutions’ internal problems, such as undue bureaucracies and weak financial administration that resulted in “delays in procurement” (UB35). This conforms to the rigid procurement systems in Ethiopian universities (Teferra et al., 2018). Others were linked to inconsistencies in practices and systems between the local institutions and NORAD’s requirements. For example, auditing, financial transaction, and reporting systems that NORAD requires to be employed were described as difficult to integrate into the local contexts and led to delay of disbursements (e.g., UA11, UB28).

Another important point highlighted in both cases was the key role of academics in establishing and leveraging the partnership, as observed in previous studies (Arrowood & Hitch, 2016; Bordogna, 2017; Gieser, 2016). It is noted that coordinators assumed most of the responsibilities of the partnership, and played a key role in negotiating, designing, and decision-making, as previously observed. One administrator underscored [UB] coordinator’s “lack of commitments and leadership skill” (UB2) for the failure of MPhil program and other limitations in UB-NU

partnership. It appears that the relationship in the partnership and its success depended much on the individual personalities and leadership qualities.

The interview also revealed that several academics (e.g., UB27, UB29, UB33, UA10, UA12, UA8) don't view their Norwegian colleagues as 'partners' who work for mutual benefits; rather they see them as 'supporters'. Yet, they also view the relationship as generally positive and enabling to building the local partners' capacity building. To quote one of the academics' comments: "The [NU] members are assisting us to realize our capacity development goals" (UA8). It appears that the partnerships are viewed as benevolent relationships intended to assist the allegedly low-profiled Southern partners, not as opportunities for mutual benefits (Koehn & Obamba, 2014). This has implications for undermining complementarity and mutuality between partners.

In both cases, partnerships have been monitored and evaluated on both a formative and summative basis. These practices were recognized as useful for exploring gaps, getting feedback, and making necessary adjustments. The formative monitoring and evaluation practices were, in most part, recognized as inclusive of both parties. However, asymmetrical tendencies were also reported in both cases. For example, the summative evaluations were "carried out by an evaluation team on behalf of NORAD" (UA3), while the local partners' involvement being limited to delivering data and comments on the evaluation results. Participants also claimed that the evaluation and progress reporting was based on performance indicators and report templates, predominantly, designed by NORAD.

What contents to be evaluated and in what formats to be reported are already indicated in the template provided by NORAD. It is based on this template that we prepare the progress reports (UB24).

A review of the progress reports also indicated that the report, primarily, focused on partnership results or benefits of the local partners while overlooking those on the side of the foreign partner. Indicators or expected benefits on the side of the Norwegian partners appear to be outside the scope of the monitoring and evaluation of the partnership. Such ignorance of "costs and benefits to Northern higher education partners..." is reflective of asymmetrical patterns of evaluation (Koehn & Uitto, 2015, p.4).

Discussions

This study explores and maps out the patterns of relationships in the North-South HEP development. It centres on how the local partners describe their experience in the partnership with respect to their positioning and compares the two cases in view of better-understanding nuances, and drawing lessons that lead to mutuality.

Generally, this study manifested both aspects of mutuality (in terms of equity, participation, autonomy, and solidarity) as well as challenges counteracting it, with certain variations across the two cases. Regarding equity, for example, NORAD advocates a North-South HEP that promotes mutuality and equity. The Norwegian partners emphasized overcoming power differentials by providing the local partners with a participatory role in initiating, planning, and decision-making process. Although the degree varies across the cases, the local partners have played a role in identifying and setting partnership agenda, formulating objectives, and distributing roles and responsibilities. This means the Southern inputs were included in the partnership programs. Most importantly, participants underlined that the major partnership arrangements and practices were made based on discussions and mutual agreements between partners. Such mutual consensus and collaborative decisions on matters of partnership goals and forms conform to the notion of equity (Hayhoe, 1986b; Leng, 2016)

Another aspect of equity that the academics acknowledged was their being credited as first author and editor in joint publications. This appears to be different from the practices oftentimes observed in the North-South research partnerships in which the Southern scholars tend to possess the role of assistants or local facilitators (Jamil & Haque, 2016; Halveson, 2016). The study also revealed some challenges that relegated the local partners to a subordinate positioning. For example, although mutual agreements were reached in partnerships' goals and activities, their focus was capacity building of the local partners. Such partnerships often emphasize the support of Southern partners by the Northern (Andriansen & Madsen, 2019). Intrinsically, this reflects unbalanced perceived benefits, the local partners being viewed as the main beneficiary of the partnership. Herein, participants mentioned a range of benefits that the partnership brought to the local partners, for instance, growth in academic and research capacity, funding, and new international linkages. The evaluation practices were also bounded to the results and benefits obtained by the local partners. Yet, as the participants commented, the partnerships were also beneficial to the Norwegian partners, to the least, exposure to the Southern academic environment (e.g., Teferra, 2014). All these are reflective of inequitable positioning that undermines the contribution of the local partners and the partnership to the Northern partners (Koehn & Uitto, 2015; Teferra, 2014).

Moreover, some of the NORAD's requirements were noted to undermining the negotiating power of the local partners and thus challenged equity between partners. Noticeably, NORAD's funding was tied with gender mainstreaming, which tended to compromise the local partners' priorities. Such involvement of the funding agency in the North-South partnership often challenges equity (Menashy, 2018). Regarding participation, it is argued that active participation of partner members starting from the partnership initiation and planning stage helps to gain their buy-in and keep the partnership on track while abandoning their involvement tends to erode their sense of ownership and thereby impair the functioning of the partnership (Helms, 2015). This study revealed that members from the local partners have been involved in the partnership development, although with various degrees across the cases. For example, PhD students (in both cases) and faculty members

(in UA) have published their joint-research works in international journals. Such a contribution of the local partners in knowledge production reflects the mutuality tenet of participation (Hayhoe, 1986b). However, linked to differences in partnership modalities, paths, and activities, and capacities of the local partners, a slightly higher degree of participation of the local partner was manifested in the UA-NU partnership, compared to that of the UB-NU partnership.

It appeared that the UA-NU partnership that followed a bottom-up path of establishment has provided the operating members with better opportunities to engage in the partnership development, compared to the UB-NU partnership that followed a top-down path. In the UA-NU partnership, members of both parties were participating starting from the first meetings through proposing project ideas and planning to implementation. However, the participation level of the local partner in UB-NU partnership was relatively limited. Also, the major activities of the UB-NU ‘sandwich’ program were run mainly by the Norwegians, with minimal involvement of the UB side due to its lack of qualified staff, while the UA-NU ‘at-home’ partnership was run with the involvement of both parties. Compared to the UB, UA’s relatively better staff capacity in managing PhD training has positioned it to play a substantial role and participation in the partnership. The presence of joint-research in UA-NU partnership has also brought up an added advantage for the involvement of more local academics. Research-driven activity was viewed as preferable to training-driven ones in fostering the participation level of the local academics at various qualification levels. Hence, it appears that compared to the UA-NU partnership, the UB-NU partnership exhibited more asymmetry.

Autonomy emphasizes that both parties respect each other’s contributions and needs (Hayhoe, 1986). In this study, local academics and students were highly appreciative of the respect and autonomy their Norwegian colleagues and advisors gave them while working together. Principally, local actors were encouraged to propose partnership projects having local relevance. However, this study also revealed that although the Norwegian partners didn’t show a desire to place themselves in a dominant position, they were perceived as a source of knowledge and expertise to the partnerships (Mwangi, 2017). They were viewed as more experienced who deserve to be mentors and patrons of the local partners. On the contrary, the local partners were perceived to have a lack of such expertise, and relegated to be responsible for facilitating and providing information of the local environment and context. Consequently, while members of the local partners have a strong interest to learn and acquire knowledge and academic experience from their Norwegian colleagues, the Norwegians appeared to be less interested in gaining knowledge from the local partners. This tends to reinforce a unidirectional transfer of knowledge from North to South, which would be problematic for ensuring the mutuality tenet of autonomy (Jooste, 2015; Mwangi, 2017).

The study also revealed practices that tend to undermine and place the local norms and practices at a disadvantageous position. For example, it is noted that local partners were required to conform

to NORAD-driven accounting and reporting systems and procedures and performance indicators, with little inputs from the local partners. Such practice runs counter to autonomy that requires consideration of working cultures and norms of the local partners (Leng, 2016).

The two cases also demonstrated aspects of solidarity, in varying degrees, in terms of strengthening interconnections and of bringing supports to the partnerships (Leng, 2016). In both cases, linkages with other international partnership projects were established in which they collaborated in training, workshops, and conferences and from which the partnership programs were able to get additional resource supports. Plus, both partnerships have created the opportunity for the local partners to form new partnerships with other local institutions. Such progress in interconnections and linkages with local and foreign partners demonstrates aspects of solidarity (Leng & Pan, 2013). Yet, the UA-NU partnership demonstrated relatively a stronger degree of inter-personal relationships than the UB-NU partnership. Involvement of UA-NU partnership members in joint-research and co-advising was valued to fostering solidarity, and participants commented that their relationship has grown up to “family hood” (UA6). Community engagement activities in UA-NU partnership were also praised for strengthening interconnections with the local community. Relatively, the interaction between partner members in UB-NU partnership appears relatively loose, as only a few academics on the UB side (mainly the coordinator) were participating in the partnership.

Conclusions

In North-South relations, structural power asymmetry seems unavoidable (Andriansen & Madsen, 2019), albeit the context may give ground for the relationship patterns. In view of the broader North-South geopolitical context, one can argue that partnerships involving the Norwegian and the Ethiopian HEIs would be shaped by power relations. Recognizing the inherent power differentials, however, this study illuminates lessons on how such partnerships can go beyond asymmetry, and towards mutuality. The two case studies have exhibited structural variables, although, with various degrees, that contributed to constraining the Southern partners’ role and participation in the partnership. For example, linked to the scarcity of local resources, the external financial source has determined the establishment of the partnerships and the selection of partners (often to be the Northern). The difference in academic and research capacity was another structural factor that contributed to shaping the purposes of the partnerships to be oriented to capacity building of the Southern partner. The capacity difference also contributed to imbalances in roles and responsibilities and financial distributions, in favor of the Northern partners. The study further revealed the influence of the funding body’s interests in selecting certain partnership agenda. Undeniably, power structures are entrenched in such partnerships and may continue as obstacles to mutuality.

Within such circumstances, however, partners can navigate pathways by which asymmetries can be, somewhat, counterbalanced and the relationship can pursue in a less patronizing way. For example, the Norwegian partners have attempted to ensure they are not dominating the local partners by providing them a participatory role. Partners, through recognizing power differentials and seeking ways of mitigating the same, promisingly tended to go beyond asymmetry and promote aspects of mutuality in terms of equity, participation, autonomy, and solidarity. Comparatively, one of the partnerships exhibited a stronger degree of mutuality. This is due to differences in the arrangements and practices regarding the partnership modalities, pathways, activities, and individuals involved. This tells that partners can make context-sensitive and practical adjustments in partnership arrangements that can enhance the Southern partners' participatory role. The next paragraphs elucidate how these context-sensitive variables. (i.e., partnership modalities, pathways, activities, and individuals) have contributed to either counterbalancing or reinforcing the effects of asymmetries. International partnerships are expected to address the demands for internationalization while maintaining the local needs. The choice of partnership modality is, thus, to be in consideration of balancing this issue. This study shows that 'at-home' partnership modality promotes the participation and ownership of the Southern partner, compared to the 'sandwich' modality that involves scholarship abroad. Of course, qualifications the Southern academics acquire from the Northern institutions through 'sandwich' scholarship are valued to raise the academic standard and graduates' social recognition. However, an international standard is, sometimes, elusive and it would be simplistic to assume the so-called 'international standard' is relevant and exactly fits with the local needs (Mamdani, 2016). In this perspective, 'at-home' modality sounds laudable, as not only it provides students with international experience while staying at home, but also it facilitates knowledge production within the South that responds to local needs.

The study shows that a partnership can be formed either through an agreement between higher officials or through faculties' initiation at the academic unit. No matter how the partnership follows a top-down or a bottom-up pathway of development, what matters most is how well the partnership arrangement and decisions regarding the activities are grounded in the academic unit and involve its academics (operating members) who engage in the actual interaction. For example, in one of the case studies, the partnership activities which were initiated and conceptualized at the top, with little knowledge of the academic unit, remained unsuccessful. This also suggests the need for keeping a balance between top-down and bottom-up partnership arrangements. This study shows that personal links served as a launching pad for the emergence of partnerships. Moreover, individual coordinators were shouldering much of the responsibilities for creating and pursuing the partnership. Also, such a significant role of coordinators in directing the interpersonal interaction and partnership dynamics implies that individuals involved in the partnership can contribute to, either, redressing or reinforcing the effects of structural obstacles. It should also be noted that differences in the diversity and type of partnership activities resulted in differences in

the level of participation of the Southern partners, and thereby to be considered in partnership formation.

In conclusion, power relation seems to persist in the North-South HEP that tends to place the Southern partners at a disadvantageous positioning. Yet, inequalities in resources and capacity can also serve as a basis for complementarity and collaboration, provided that partners recognize such imbalances and navigate ways to mitigating their problematic consequences. Promisingly, this study discloses pathways to mutuality. It is noted that certain contextual and practical arrangements have enabled the partnership to function well within the inherent power relation and to go beyond it. Thus, if a partnership has to move forward to mutuality, partners shall recognize the sources of asymmetry and work together to reduce its potential effects.

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Appendices

A. Overview of the two partnership programs

	UA-NU partnership	UB-NU partnership
Funding source	NORAD	
Main purpose	Capacity building of the local partner	
Duration	Six years (from late 2013-2020)	
Previous linkage	Institutional and personal linkages	Personal linkage
Main partnership activities	PhD training, joint-research, short-term training, community engagement, MA curriculum design	PhD and MPhil (Masters of Philosophy) training, short-term training, MPhil curriculum design

Modality	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - ‘At-home’—the partnership is, hosted in UA, with students’ study visits in NU. - Involves both UA and NU academics - UA offers the degree 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - ‘Sandwich’—PhD and MPhil training is hosted in both institutions. - NU offers scholarships to PhD and MPhil students. - NU offers the PhD degree.
Pathways of development	<p>More of bottom-up—formed at the department level with ratification at the university level.</p>	<p>More of top-down—formed at the college level and tried to engage departments.</p>
Progresses till end of 2020	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - of 14 PhD students, 7 of them have completed their studies; - Three peer-reviewed books and 29 articles and book chapters were published; - Language resources (e.g., 2 dictionaries, 8 speech corpora, 5 web-archived corpora) were developed for some languages. - MA Curriculum for Sign Language was designed. - Training on linguistic was offered to many local community members. - two new partnerships were created. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - of 12 PhD students, 03 of them have completed their studies; - 15 MPhil students have completed elective courses at NU; - 17 articles were published by PhD students - Various short-term training and workshops that benefited UB’s staff and students were offered. - new partnerships were created with one local and two foreign partners that brought additional joint-research opportunities and supports.

B. Summary of partners’ roles and responsibilities

UA-NU Partnership			UB-NU Partnership		
Joint assignments	UA’s responsibilities	NU’s responsibilities	Joint assignments	UA’s responsibilities	NU’s responsibilities

-developing proposal, -designing MA curriculum -offer courses -co-supervise PhD students -conduct joint-research -engage in community service activities	-host the project -manage the project -facilitate networki ng with local communi ty	-assisting UA in managing, coordinating and implementing the project -empowering and supporting NU staff through experience sharing capacity building training -providing access to laboratory - assisting UA in developing language technology	-developing proposal, scheduling, budgeting, -recruit PhD and MPhil students from UB -develop MPhil curriculum -host and offer MPhil students	-managing and monitoring the project -reporting progresses in consultation with NU -offer courses to MPhil students when they come back home	-provide support to UB, share experience, -offer short-term training to UB staff, -mentor BU academics and students -host, offer course, and supervise PhD students -host, offer course to MPhil students -provide educational material access to UB staff and students
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Summarized from interviews and review of documents