

Partnership and collaboration with African Institutions:

A perspective from the North

By

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Introduction

Academic collaboration has a longstanding international tradition. Research is in essence internationally oriented and researchers are used to international collaboration. International collaboration in teaching is more recent and was inspired by the desire to stimulate mobility of staff and students (Bologna process in Europe), to improve the quality of education and to attract (self-paying) foreign students for economic reasons (especially USA, UK and Australia).

Collaboration between academic institutions in the North and institutions in Africa is characterised by an evolutionary process from pure capacity building to equal partnerships, from social commitment to matching interests, from specific needs to global strategies. A brief review of the evolution of this process makes it possible to better understand the present situation.

The early years

Shortly after the Second World War when most African countries gained independence, support from the North was rendered for the training of skilled manpower. Scholarships were established for African students to study in the North with the expectation that upon return the graduates would contribute to the development of their respective countries. Young universities in Africa were assisted in setting up facilities, developing curricula and training staff. The Swedish government was among the first donors to support the building of research capacities in developing countries.

In those early years, a commitment to help build the higher education sector in developing countries was cultivated at universities in the North as part of their institutional mission. If not from their own resources, universities in the North financed collaborations through development cooperation funds made available by their national governments. Many governments in Northern countries set up scholarship programmes and cooperation programmes in higher education and research, which were meant to strengthen capacity in developing countries. Many of those programmes still exist today.

Because the experience levels of the collaborating institutions in the North and in Africa were so far apart, the relationships between them tended to be very unequal. The Northern institutions assumed the role of teachers and would not acknowledge that they also learned something from this type of collaboration.

Changes that mattered

Since those early days, the world (of higher education) has changed substantially. Access to higher education everywhere has expanded tremendously while funds have not increased proportionately. In most Northern countries, governments decided to change the formula for higher education funding from input to output financing. Higher education institutions were thus encouraged to gain extra funds through marketing practices and public private partnerships. At the same time, internationalisation became a new focal point for many institutions in Europe and elsewhere. Institutions, curricula, students and staff had to become international in order to improve the quality of education and to stimulate international mobility. In Europe, the Bologna process was initiated to create one higher education area throughout the continent.

These policy changes forced reconsideration of priorities and strategies at academic institutions. Budget cuts and the internationalisation agenda required them to become more selective in maintaining areas of expertise and in pursuing collaborations with partners. It was considered more advantageous to collaborate with prestigious academic institutions and partners in richer countries (or BRICs) than with low-reputation colleagues in poor countries.

A shift in interests

As a result of such policy changes, interest in academic collaboration with institutions in Africa dwindled. There was no longer room for collaboration based on social commitment; instead, precedence was given to collaboration with inherent opportunities for realising short-term academic and financial benefits, preferably with partners that were on par in terms of academic levels. Over the years, a small number of universities in Africa had achieved this level of international standing, yet due to financial constraints and rapid enrolment increases, academic institutions in many African countries remained weak.

Unfortunately, while institutions in the North began focusing on internationalisation and ranking strategies, development donors became stricter regarding the main objectives of the capacity building programmes they funded. The main argument for this was that development cooperation moneys should be fully dedicated to the needs of developing countries, not used to co-finance higher education institutions in the North. The scholarships should strengthen institutions in developing countries and the collaborative projects should serve the capacity needs solely of these institutions. The Southern institutions were entrusted with the “ownership” of the collaborations, thus theoretically helping to balance the partnerships, although the capacity building element still put Southern institutions in a weaker position.

With the shift in donor policies, there were fewer opportunities for Northern institutions to use collaboration project funds to pursue their interests as well as those of the collaborating partner. This trend became clearly visible in the development cooperation programmes funded by the Dutch, Flemish, Norwegian, and UK governments. Germany is one of the exceptions where the ministries of foreign affairs, education and development cooperation share a common vision about the importance of international cooperation in higher education, including those with developing countries.

Challenges

Currently, there are several major challenges to academic cooperation between institutions in Africa and in the North.

For financial reasons, many Northern institutions look for collaborations that offer certain and quick returns. Preferably such institutions want to “marry upwards”; alternatively, they approach up-and-coming universities in BRIC countries. In Africa, only well-established universities, especially in South Africa, are usually targeted for collaboration.

The funds to invest in collaborations with low-prestige partners are decreasing. Returns from such partnerships are uncertain and long term; development cooperation funds are less available for establishing long-term collaborations. Instead, available funds are meant to render short-term technical assistance to bridge capacity gaps in Southern institutions.

With the exception of Germany, policies of the national ministries in Northern countries are neither coherent nor conducive to engaging in international partnerships and longer-term academic collaborations. The Paris Declaration of 2005 talks about better coordination of support and local priorities in developing countries, but does not mention policy coordination at home. The policies of the ministries of education (internationalisation focus – to benefit the national higher education sector), foreign affairs (to promote national interests and international stability) and development cooperation (demand-driven with ownership in developing countries) seem to diverge rather than converge.

Room for improvements

Certain conditions need to be met for Northern institutions (especially those in Northern Europe) to engage in partnerships and collaborations with African institutions effectively:

- Institutions in the North should broaden their strategic horizons from a short-term, profit-oriented and egocentric perspective to a longer-term, global perspective. They need to be aware of the fact that the world is changing rapidly and, with it, opportunities are changing as well. Today’s developing countries will be the new BRICs of tomorrow. It is smart to invest in them now to be the first to benefit in future. In addition, problems and research questions are increasingly becoming global and solutions likewise need to be developed on a global scale. All resources in the world, wherever they are, should be co-opted to these ends. Indeed, Northern institutions should take a closer look at the way the Chinese are organising their collaboration with Africa; they treat African partners as equals and are prepared to make investments upfront, no doubt with the intention of reaping the benefits in future.
- **Mutual benefits** form the best foundation for establishing sustainable collaborations. This can be arranged on the basis of sound analysis and negotiations, proper planning, give-and-take and respect for one another.
- **African institutions** should argue the case for true partnerships. Although they may not be able to contribute at the same level at the start of collaboration, nevertheless

they have valuable contributions to make. In time, the scale will level and possibly swing to the other side.

- **Governments** in the North should try to create greater coherence among policy areas, especially those of education, development cooperation, economic and foreign affairs. International collaboration in higher education and research touches all these spheres and it would help academic institutions a great deal if these policies were coherent and complementary. International collaboration in higher education, including with less-developed countries, should be seen as an asset and investment in the future with good longer-term return in terms of improved academic quality, international relationships and economic profits.
- **Development cooperation** programmes that fund such collaborations should allow some room for institutions to identify and formulate collaboration with partners that not only contribute to ministerial policy goals but also to their own mission and strategy. This presumes a balance between different interests by the stakeholders involved.

Collaboration with African institutions should be of strategic interest for (academic institutions in) the North, yet this requires a clear vision by institutional leaders and a coherent policy framework that stimulates and supports such efforts.

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