

Strengthening North-South Partnerships in Higher and Tertiary Education: Bridging the Divide for Global Progress



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Introduction:

In an increasingly interconnected and interdependent world, the importance of global collaboration in higher and tertiary education cannot be overstated. North-South partnerships play a pivotal role in addressing the challenges and seizing the opportunities that transcend national borders in higher and tertiary education. These partnerships between institutions and individuals from more economically developed "North" regions and less economically developed "South" regions, have the potential to drive positive change on a global scale. This thought piece delves into the significance of strengthening North-South partnerships in higher and tertiary education and explores the ways in which such collaborations can bridge divides and foster sustainable higher and tertiary education development on a worldwide scale.

AGRINATURA (an Alliance of European Universities and Research centres supporting agricultural research and development (ARD) by establishing research project consortia, leading science policy dialogue, and providing an evidence-based knowledge platform for capacity building to improve the livelihoods of farmers and their communities) and RUFORUM (a consortium of universities in Africa, with 170 universities in 40 countries) work together to build portfolios of education actions, trialling new teaching and learning practices and technologies, and incentivising actors in higher and tertiary education to build new educational models for citizen engagement.

Addressing Inequities in Access to Quality Education:

One of the primary goals of North-South partnerships in higher and tertiary education is to mitigate disparities in access to quality education. Institutions in economically developed nations often possess advanced educational resources, cutting-edge research facilities, and experienced faculty members. By sharing these resources with their counterparts in less developed regions, these partnerships can help level the playing field. This, in turn, contributes to the global achievement of Sustainable Development Goal 4, which aims to ensure inclusive and equitable quality education for all.

The proliferation of private higher and tertiary education across the African continent, has not enriched or changed our greater understanding and practice of teaching learning and research. However, teaching learning and research cooperation are necessary to generate new knowledge, which is an important element in the global development architecture towards a more inclusive, effective, and horizontal global education development agenda. Both private and public higher and tertiary education suffers the same fate.

Governments should take a decisive decision in promoting endogenous capacity development to boost reforms at institutional and policy levels to enhance and improve higher and tertiary education while at the same time provide the resources needed to build bridges between North-South through a triangular cooperation model that promote a win-win-win situation for all.

Enhancing Capacity Building:

North-South collaborations are instrumental in capacity building. Developing nations can benefit from knowledge transfer, research collaboration, and technical assistance from their more developed partners. These partnerships empower local institutions to build their expertise, develop their own research programmes, and provide high-quality education and training. This, in essence, is a step towards reducing dependence on foreign aid and fostering self-sufficiency in education systems.

African higher and tertiary education government (high-level education authorities) need to strengthen their funding focus on higher and tertiary education capacities to match demand and supply of teaching learning and research knowledge, which must be consistent in generating practices and skill sets, targeted at innovative teaching learning and research for human development. It is also imperative that any partnership should also expand to building structures and developing capacities in the South universities that will allow them to enhance their research component.

Promoting Cultural Exchange and Diversity:

Education is not just about textbooks and classrooms; it's also about fostering understanding and empathy. North-South partnerships in higher and tertiary education facilitate cultural exchange, which is an invaluable component of global education. Students and faculty members from different backgrounds should regularly come together to share experiences, perspectives, and worldviews. This exposure to diversity enriches the educational experience and equips graduates with the intercultural skills essential for global citizenship.

The ethical principles underlying North-South partnerships must be transparency; accountability and responsibility; disclosure and honesty, sensitivity, awareness and alignment, integrity, respect and trust, mutual benefit, reciprocity and local 'embeddedness', self and partner knowledge, flexibility and equity.

While transparency is intrinsically linked to disclosure, it must be emphasised that higher and tertiary education partners should be upfront and honest about their expectations, motives, needs, strengths, challenges, resources and risks.

Unequal access to education equals unequal outcomes in going to scale, which leads to stark education inequality between developed and developing countries. Therefore, African governments must organize, validate, and legitimize knowledge as the core influence, including access to different pathways of higher and tertiary education.

Driving Research and Innovation:

Collaborative research endeavours between North and South institutions can accelerate progress and innovation. However, complete lack and dearth of infrastructure (electricity) pose a remarkable challenge and potential risk, especially when technology becomes a centrepiece of higher and tertiary education daily struggles. By pooling resources, infrastructure, knowledge, and expertise, through partnerships can go a long way to tackle education challenges more effectively. Whether it's addressing climate change, agricultural development, healthcare disparities, or technological advancement, the combined brainpower and resources of diverse institutions can lead to transformative breakthroughs that benefit the entire world.

Any strategic plan for North-South higher and tertiary education cooperation should ultimately be rooted in solving local problems, developing capacity, and within the overall education contexts. These strategic actions will help direct investment to the most needed areas depending on context something best understood by country's higher and tertiary education leadership itself, through a well-planned operationalisation and implementation protocols that is inclusive going forward.

Realizing the Potential of Technology:

The digital era has revolutionized the way education is delivered and accessed. North-South partnerships can harness the power of technology to reach underserved communities and create new, innovative models of assessing education material, for example, "EDUROAM" has served western higher and tertiary education to access academic resources through the Eduroam internet connection system as one criss-cross different universities and research institutions in Europe as one advance teaching learning and research. E-learning platforms, remote lectures, and open educational resources can bridge geographical gaps and provide education to those who might not have had access otherwise.

Challenges and Considerations:

While the potential benefits of North-South partnerships in higher and tertiary education are immense, there are challenges that need to be addressed. These include issues related to funding, cultural differences, and ensuring that the partnerships are truly collaborative, rather than one-sided. Responsible investments in higher and tertiary education is critical to promote education inclusiveness, increase knowledge capacity growth, and ignite and ultimately facilitate an ethical partnerships that is transparent, accountable and responsible.

There is a need to identify the types of higher and tertiary education approaches and synergies that are intrinsically linked with diverse effects, that are upfront and honest about the expectations, motives, needs, strengths, challenges, resources and risks, which can be shared through strategic planning rooted in local problems, strength, and overall context will be key going forward.

Within the African continent, it will be appropriate to suggest that higher and tertiary education institutions should share learning experiences, while exploring their complementary strengths to go beyond the currently unfit, non-indigenised teaching and learning practices that feeds into learning systems that are not fit for purpose.

Conclusion:

Strengthening North-South partnerships in higher and tertiary education is not just a noble endeavour; it's a strategic imperative. It requires all hands-on deck to deploy a deep demonstration and collaborative process to identify, test at scale, and implement a range of connected education solutions for the continent to accelerate and experience the desired change.

Higher and tertiary education must collaborate with businesses, policymakers, researchers, and citizens to create and implement tailored solutions to tertiary education challenges, while ensuring we are learning from each other and collectively pushing forward training needs for this century. These partnerships are central to achieving global sustainable development goals, fostering equity, and unleashing the potential of education as a driver of positive change. As the world becomes more interconnected and interdependent, these collaborations are an investment in our shared future. By bridging divides, fostering inclusivity, and promoting knowledge exchange, these partnerships can lead us towards a brighter, more equitable future where education is a global force for good.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Dr. Stephen Onakuse is a Senior Lecturer in the Department of Food Business and Development and Deputy Director of the Centre for Sustainable Livelihoods at Cork University Business School, University College Cork in Ireland, and the President of the European Alliance on Agricultural Knowledge for Development (AGRINATURA). He is an agriculturist and much of his research investigate agricultural systems, value chain analysis for development and sustainable production. He holds a PhD in Food Business and Development from the University College Cork. He is the University College Cork Principal Investigator on the European Union DeSIRA funded project focusing on Climate Smart Agriculture Research and Innovation Support for Dairy Value Chains in Eritrea and the Principal Investigator on an Environmental Protection Agency (EPA) project focusing on Sustainable Production and Consumption – the impact of social norms (SPAC). He is a Steering Committee Member of the Tropical Agriculture Platform (TAP) Food and Agriculture (FAO) of the United Nations, and a member of Task Force Team on National Pathways for Food Systems Transformation in Nigeria.

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