

Interrogating the power dynamics in international projects

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Abstract

The push for global rankings and the possibility of attaining funding mean that participation in international projects is prized. Although international projects can bring enormous benefits, they can also exhibit 'social dynamics' (Bradley, 2008) that impact equality of participation. In the case of Global North-Global South partnerships, these social dynamics are often shaped by legacies of colonialism. For South African partners, they can also be shaped by history and the way it continues to impact on the institutional landscape. This paper draws on one project, involving six South African and six European universities, to explore the way these dynamics played out. Archer's (1995, 1996, 2000) social realism is used to analyse the dynamics of the project and, more specifically, the way different project partners' ability to exercise their agency was shaped by the social and cultural conditions in the global and national arena as well as within the project itself.

Keywords: International projects, higher education, inequality, social dynamics

Introduction

In South African universities, the concept of 'internationalisation' is prized for a number of reasons. The chase for global rankings, for example, makes links with universities in other parts of the world highly desirable. Prospects of funding for research and projects are also attractive. A lot of funding available for international projects is 'aid-based' and comes out of budgets set aside for 'development' by national and regional governments. When projects are constructed within aid discourses, however, the dynamics of working in them can be complex because of lines of structural inequality between participating partners (Bradley, 2008). As a result, participation needs to be undertaken with high levels of criticality and mutual respect if these inequalities are not to be reproduced.

This paper reflects on one such project to explore the way inequalities might be built into internationally funded collaborations and, importantly, how they might be overcome. We begin with



a brief consideration of the rise in funding of projects in the Global South by nations in the Global North to elaborate on the context in which the work took place.

The rise of international aid

Escobar (1995) notes that the idea that international aid could foster 'development' can be traced back to US foreign policy after World War II, the main aim of which was to resist Soviet expansion. From its very inception, the linking of 'aid' to 'development' can therefore be seen not to be entirely altruistic. As the 20th century drew to a close, growing awareness of the interconnectedness of the global order and acknowledgement of the link between 'development' and modernization, led to widespread critique. Writers such as Ferguson (1990), Sachs (1992), and Escobar (1995) claim that the relationship between development and modernisation essentially involves the extension of control by the 'developed' over the 'underdeveloped' through the use of neoliberal initiatives prioritising free market policies over the wellbeing of people.

Sachs (1992: xviii) elaborates thus:

... development cannot be separated from the idea that all peoples of the planet are moving along one single track towards some state of maturity, exemplified by the nations 'running in front'. In this view, Tuaregs, Zapotecos or Rajasthanis are not seen as living diverse and non-comparable ways of human existence, but as somehow lacking in terms of what has been achieved by the advanced countries. Consequently, catching up was declared to be their historical task. From the start, development's hidden agenda was nothing else than the Westernization of the world.

In the preface to a new edition of his 1992 text, Sachs (2010: viii) problematizes the traditional 'development divides' identified above by pointing out that globalization has resulted in the creation of a 'transnational consumer class'. Members of this class,

... shop in similar malls, buy the same hi-tech equipment, see the same films and television series, roam the globe as tourists and dispose of the key instrument of assimilation: money. They are part of a transnational economic complex which is now developing its markets on a global scale. Nokia supplies it everywhere with mobile telephones, Toyota with cars, Sony with televisions, Siemens with refrigerators, Burger King with fast-food joints...

In many respects, therefore, 'development' has now come to involve the promotion of engagement with the global economy where participation is no longer structured by national boundaries but through access to money and technology.

International aid for higher education

All this has profound implications for international aid projects and, particularly, for those that focus on higher education. Molla (2014), for example, drawing on an international aid project focused on higher education in Ethiopia, points out that pressure exerted by donors to introduce widespread reforms often results in the adoption of a neoliberal educational agenda in the recipient country and thus to the strengthening of globalised ideologies.

Funding for higher education was reduced in the second half of the twentieth century thanks to the claim, promoted by the World Bank, that it was improved schooling that would lead to development (Singh, 2010). As globalisation accelerated, the idea that economies were now based on knowledge as a core currency meant that higher education projects became a focus for funding once again. As writers such as Apodaca (2017) and Mokoena (2017) point out, however, aid provided for higher education is never disinterested in that it continues to serve the interests of wealthy donor countries, this time by ensuring that those in the Global South are included in transnational consumer markets.

This is not the only benefit to accrue to donors, however. Across the world, neo-liberal ideology has resulted in a decrease in state funding for higher education alongside the introduction of practices intended to improve efficiency and effectiveness and enhance accountability (see, for example, Broucker, et al., 2015). The use of metrics to measure performance by counting 'outputs' produced by academics allows judgements to be made about the extent to they are 'value for money' at institutional levels. As higher education is now the third largest employer of casual staff in the world (Ryan, et al., 2013), employability is often dependent on the ability not only to justify salary costs but also to contribute towards them. In the USA, many faculty members are paid only for the nine months of the year when the university is in session. They are then left to seek research grants which will allow them to be paid for conducting research over the summer period (Kreuter, 2012).

Gaining funding for aid projects can serve this process of justifying or contributing to salaries and many universities now provide lists of experts and the projects they have worked on. The need to sell the services of academics and the knowledge they produce is also seen in the establishment of institutional centres with a mandate to drive innovation and development. All this allows Bradley (2008) to argue that contributing to projects in the Global South is a means of mitigating the effects of neoliberal policy on funding for higher education.

Yet another effect of funding higher education in the name of 'development' is that it can contribute to constructions of knowledge as a commodity to be traded (Singh, 2010; Teferra, 2008). This may then reduce willingness to fund knowledge-making without immediate economic value. Yet others (for example, King, 1990; Brown, 1992; Samoff, 2004; Olsson, 2008) observe that partnerships between researchers in the North with those in the South can serve the research agendas of funders based in the North and contribute to what Fahey and Kenway (2010: 629) call 'empires of knowledge' located in Europe and the USA.

The somewhat cynical views of international projects discussed above are mitigated by others that report positively on the impact of engagement in international projects. Rambur (2009: 80), for example, notes that 'partnerships across countries can amass and harness intellectual and material resources, augment institutional gaps and offer complementary strengths' while Barrett, et al. (2014) note that partnerships can create 'new possibilities for epistemology and pedagogy'. In a similarly positive vein, Leibowitz, et al. (2014) show that collaboration in an international project provided rich opportunities for personal and professional growth.

The idea that participation in international projects can lead to benefits such as widened understandings and, thus, improved research and teaching are, however, dependent on the extent to which collaboration is truly meaningful. Scholars such as Barrett, et al. (2011) and Barrett, et al. (2008) note that inequality in the relationship of project partners can limit such benefits. In spite of identifying the numerous advantages that accrued from the project they were involved in, Leibowitz, et al. (2014) point out that careful attention needs to be paid to the way projects are managed especially in relation to intersubjective relations in the group. In the project in South Africa that was the focus of their study, intersubjectivity related to participants' 'sense of competence, expertise or ability' (Leibowitz, et al., 2014: 1266) with some members expressing unease at their inexperience in the field in which the project was located or in educational research more generally. For Leibowitz et al. (2014) the need to pay attention to issues related to identity outweighed the need for reflexivity and the creation of a sharing environment cited as crucial in the literature (see, for example, Christie, et al., 2007).

This paper seeks to contribute to the literature on international projects by drawing on one project involving partners from South African and Europe. More specifically it aims to contribute to understandings of what Bradley (2008) terms the 'social dynamics' of such projects and particularly on the ways inequality can play out.

The project

The 'Enhancing Postgraduate Environments' (EPE) project, which is the focus of this paper, was funded through the Erasmus+ scheme of the European Union (EU). The programme guide (European Commission, 2020: 161) identifies projects that lead to the 'modernisation of governance, management and functioning of HEIs' as eligible for funding. Although the Erasmus+ guide draws extensively on the concept of 'partnership', it also notes that 'the programme is designed to support programme countries' efforts to efficiently use the potential of Europe's talent and social assets' (European Commission, 2020: 5). Although not all nations eligible to be designated 'programme countries' are located in the North, the statement above appears to indicate the assumption that it is there, or at least in Europe, that capacity lies.

The project, in which we served as leaders of the 'recipient countries' and colleagues in the Netherlands served as overall project leaders, involved six South African and six European institutions

located in the Netherlands, Germany, Scotland, and Turkey. The project was focused on enhancing the environments in which supervisors and postgraduate students work in South African universities. Of the South African universities, three are classed as 'historically disadvantaged institutions' and three as 'historically advantaged'. Under apartheid, universities designated for white population groups benefited enormously from funding. This was not the only way advantaged/disadvantaged status played out, however, as it was never intended that institutions established to serve black students would focus on research and postgraduate education (Bunting, 2002). Since the first democratic election of 1994, historically black institutions have striven to build capacity in research and postgraduate education on a still uneven terrain (Bawa & Mouton, 2002; Cloete, et al., 2015). Given the focus of the project on postgraduate education, the potential was therefore for power imbalances to privilege not only the European partners but also the historically white South African institutions given historically constructed differences in the higher education system.

Some of the project partners in both the North and South had worked together on a previous project, initially funded by the Dutch government and then by a grant provided by the South African Department of Higher Education and Training. This previous project had resulted in a highly successful course for postgraduate supervisors being offered in universities across South Africa. One of the concerns emerging from the previous initiative was that the focus on developing the capacity of supervisors neglected the various ways in which the institutional structures and cultures affected supervision practices (Motshoane & McKenna, 2014). The new project therefore aimed to extend the previous focus on the supervisor and postgraduate student to look at the broader institutional context within which postgraduate education takes place. Thanks to the previous project, therefore, some collegial relationships pre-existed those that needed to be forged in EPE. Four of the six institutions involved in the first project went on to participate in the second, although individuals representing these institutions sometimes changed.

The EPE project ran over three years and included multiple workshops, project team visits and, most significantly, led to the development of a website of resources for supervisors and students (www.postgradenvironments.com). These materials are all licensed under Creative Commons with the idea that they are not owned by any single person or institution.

Theoretical framing

In seeking to frame our exploration of the project dynamics theoretically, we were drawn to the work of sociologist Margaret Archer (1995, 1996, 2000) because of the way social realism allows for an analysis of the interaction between the 'people' (i.e., human agents) and the parts (structure and culture). As already indicated, to pursue its goals, the project brought together a collection of individuals from very different contexts. Archer's work promised the potential of allowing us to explore these differences in depth. The elements of Archer's work used in this paper are her concept of 'analytical dualism' and her understandings of agency itself.

Analytical dualism

For centuries, those interested in the social world have asked questions about the primacy of human thought and action versus that of social structuring. Archer's response to these debates is, firstly, to acknowledge that human beings are always conditioned by the worlds they have inherited but, secondly, to accord independent 'powers and properties' to the 'parts' (structure, culture) and the 'people' (agency). As people enact their own agential powers, they are enabled or constrained by the powers and properties of structural and cultural mechanisms in the environments they inhabit. Archer then insists on the temporal separation of 'the parts' (structure and culture) and 'the people' (agency) for purposes of analysis as the interplay between these is explored.

Archer on agency

Key to Archer's work on agency is the idea that all individuals develop their own 'concerns' defined as 'those internal goods that they care about most, the precise constellation of which makes for their concrete singularity as persons' (Archer, 2000: 7). Agents then identify 'projects' to pursue those concerns. The pursuit of these projects involves individuals exercising their own personal powers and properties in relation to those pertaining to the mechanisms with which they must interact to bring those projects to completion. As they pursue these projects, they can be enabled or constrained by other mechanisms in the domains of structure and culture. The use of Archer's work allows us to explore the way project members were enabled or constrained to participate as equals.

Research Design

As a condition of funding, the project was subject to an evaluation conducted by two external experts. The evaluators compiled their 86-page report on the basis of the following data:

- All project documents including the proposal, budget, log frame and progress reports to the funder;
- Visits to participating institutions in South Africa. These visits encompassed observations of project meetings, seminars for postgraduate students, and workshops held to develop materials for that would eventually appear on the project website (www.postgradenvironments.com);
- Analysis of 40 questionnaires administered to those involved in the project at each of the participating universities;
- Interviews with 12 project team members;
- Focus group discussions with postgraduate students at three of the South African universities; and,
- Usage data from the online site.

The evaluation itself aimed to assess the overall project, which was found to be highly successful and to have met the outcomes set for itself in the initial proposal. Although the interest of the evaluators was not specifically on the way project members were able to exercise agency, the richness of the data collected and the insights and conclusions it provided allowed us to explore this question. As researchers, we revisited the data and used the theoretical tools provided by Archer (1995, 1996, 2000) to explore the issue of agency in more detail. We had already experienced the power afforded using Archer's social realism in i) our analysis of the impact of an audit cycle on teaching and learning (Boughey & McKenna, 2017) and ii) developments in South African higher education more generally since the early 1990s (Boughey & McKenna, 2021). We were therefore keen to see how the use of a theoretical lens might allow for more insights from the data collected by the evaluators which had not been subject to analysis using a particular theoretical lens.

As discussed earlier, Archer's accordance of powers and properties to agents as well as to mechanisms operating in the domains of culture and structure means that 'any human attempt to pursue a project entails two sets of causal powers: our own and those pertaining to part of natural reality' (Archer, 2000:7). As also noted, individuals pursue these projects on the basis of broader concerns about the world they inhabit (Archer, 2000). One of the first things to note in relation to the EPE project was that participants did not necessarily share the same concern. Some may have been motivated by the need to bring in money for a centre or department, personal ambitions related to career progression or a host of other reasons. Not all members were necessarily concerned about the enhancement of postgraduate environments (the focus of the project) at institutions other than their own and this, in turn, may have been related to the way they understood social justice, a key concern for the project more generally, and the need for it. In Archer's terms, this would mean that participants were exercising their agency by drawing on a range of ideational mechanisms located in the domain of culture.

We now turn to consider some of the issues around the exercise of agency within the project that emerged from this social realist analysis of the evaluation report. To do this, we draw on Archer's theoretical work to identify structural and cultural enablements and constraints on equal participation in the project. In doing this we were particularly concerned with two axes of power involving i) the Global North/Global South split amongst project partners and ii) differences between the way historically advantaged and historically disadvantaged South African universities were able to participate as equal partners from the Global South.

Developing a shared ideology in an uneven terrain

The first constraint identified as a result of our re-analysis of the evaluation data was in the domain of culture and involved the concept of social justice. This concept was core to the funding proposal developed by project leaders, a process in which not all project members had been involved. In the context of the project, social justice was understood to relate to the diverse circumstances of

participants, to the way this had been shaped by social and historical forces, including colonialism, and the need for equity and equality in postgraduate education. This concern with social justice also extended to the way the project itself was conceptualised. However, data generated as a result of interviews and questionnaires shows that participants did not draw on a shared understanding of what social justice involved with one noting that:

We are all of a different understanding of what social justice means

and another that:

The output of facilitating social justice is a difficult one to measure.

Some partners saw the achievement of social justice in the somewhat practical terms of ensuring that all the resources developed as a result of the project were open access. Four of the participating institutions cited this as important noting that

... by making the resources open access available to all is/was one way to help level the playing fields.

Others saw the achievement of social justice as related to the fact that some of the materials dealt with the issue directly. The course on postgraduate supervision out of which the EPE project grew identified social justice as a central theme and had explored the way supervisors could contribute to this by, for example, drawing on humanising pedagogy (Salazar, 2013). The development of materials for the EPE website was thus a continuation of work begun in the earlier project. This somewhat 'concrete' understanding of the way the project contributed to social justice was evidenced in the following response to a question about this goal in the questionnaire:

a number of the materials themselves engage directly with issues of social justice in research.

However, the social dynamics of the project were not reflective of the understandings of social justice as a lived experience that informed the initial proposal.

One of the reasons for the focus on social justice as the project was conceptualised related to the diversity of the South African higher education system itself. As already noted, three of six the South African institutions were designated 'historically disadvantaged' and had thus not been afforded opportunities to develop research capacity under apartheid. One of these three had gained ground following the shift to democracy arguably partly because of its location in a major urban area and its concomitant ability to attract high performing academics. The other two were located in areas

designated for particular ethnic groups in the apartheid era far from large cities and, thus, lacking the links and infrastructure attractive to staff. In contrast, the three historically white institutions were all able to attract highly research productive staff and all had rich and well-established research cultures which meant that supervisors and their students were able to draw on a range of structural and cultural mechanisms as they pursued their study goals. For example, at the privileged universities, supervisors stood a much stronger chance of working with other colleagues who were active researchers and of being exposed to a range of activities including seminars and guest lectures. They were also more likely to be able to draw on administrative and financial support from research offices.

The historical differences between universities also affected their ability to attract postgraduate students. Postgraduate students enrich any academic environment. They provide role models for their undergraduate peers and can assist with tasks such as tutoring. They also work as research assistants or conduct research which forms part of larger projects. The ability to attract postgraduate students goes hand in hand with environments rich in research and the availability of academic staff who can supervise and lead projects. This meant that staff on the campuses of two of the partner institutions had not been afforded a great deal of experience involving postgraduate teaching. In contrast to their South African counterparts, all European partners worked in well established institutions with high levels of research output.

As already indicated, some participants had worked together on a previous project and, on the basis of this collaboration, developed the proposal for EPE. Prospective participants were invited to join the EPE project on the basis of criteria specified by the funder (European Commission, 2020). In practice, however, this meant that those developing the proposal issued invitations to participate to those with whom they had worked with in the past or of whom they had prior knowledge. As in many cases, the proposal was developed under time constraints to meet a strict submission deadline. This meant that extended consultation about the project was not attempted. Rather, invitations were issued on the basis of a description of its goal of enhancing postgraduate environments at participating institutions. This meant that the focus on social justice assumed by project leaders was not always made clear as invitations were made. The lack of opportunity for co-construction of the proposal and, indeed, the question of who had been invited to participate, emerged as a problem once the project began. What emerged as a significant cultural constraint can thus be seen to have its origins in the structural conditions which conditioned the funding proposal and approval process.

Some participants from European universities clearly believed that issues related to social justice were addressed in the life of the project, evidenced in comments which noted

the dialogue between privileged and underprivileged universities to grapple with the issues on an equal and open basis

and that

the involvement of the South African universities was inclusive, very open and the atmosphere was welcoming.

However, two participants from one institution indicated in their response to the questionnaire that issues related to social justice and diversity had not been addressed. It was evident that the concern that the project had failed to engage meaningfully with these concepts emanated mostly from the historically disadvantaged institutions. It may be the case, therefore, that those who occupied relative positions of power in the project had not 'lived' the experiences of social injustice and exclusion to the same extent as their peers.

The view that social justice had not been addressed in the project is confirmed by a comment in interviews and reported by the evaluators of the project that

the framing of the notion of social justice from an ideological and institutional perspective had been neglected in its preparation.

In addition, the questionnaire administered to participants included a request for Likert-scale response to a statement that the project had built capacity. Twenty four percent of respondents said they were unsure or disagreed with the statement. Explanations of this response included objections to the way social justice had been defined in the project. These were often accompanied by statements about the need for historical inequities to be addressed.

Uneven participation by institutions and individuals

As the project progressed, it was clear that structural imbalances amongst institutions impacted on the way participants were able to exercise their agency and thus emerged as a constraint to more equal participation. Representatives from some institutions with rich research histories enjoyed full professor status and were able to draw on the experience of having supervised many doctoral studies to completion. Others were individuals without doctorates themselves who were nominated as project members by their institutions because of their roles managing research in administrative structures. In the case of European project members, some participants were able to draw on specialist expertise in information literacy, data management and the like. As the project proceeded therefore, while some participants were able to function as what Archer terms 'social actors' by drawing on relatively powerful academic roles they occupied in their home institutions, others were not able to do this or at least they were not able to do so to the same extent.

The project focus on the development of materials for supervisors and postgraduate students meant that the status of participants impacted on the way they were able to contribute to their development with participants noting that,

not all of the partners have produced materials

and

some universities have not produced much.

The need for capacity to be able to contribute was not always appreciated, as is evident in comments calling for

more inputs from all the partners as far as EPE materials development went. Commitments seemed skewed.

The status and associated capacity of participants was not the only issue impacting on the ability to contribute to project goals, however, since other mechanisms also played a part. One of the most obvious ways in which this became apparent related to the remote location of some campuses at which events were planned. Travelling from Europe to the big South African cities is relatively easy and, apparently, a pleasant prospect. Moving beyond the big cities to more remote rurally situated campuses was not always as attractive even to South African participants. The problem of uneven attendance by project partners depending on the host institution was then compounded by poor infrastructure, a legacy of apartheid at historically black universities. Some institutions struggled with venues and catering and requested project funding to allow for events to be held at hotels off-campus. This was resisted on the grounds that the project proposal was focused on the actual postgraduate environments in which supervisors and students worked. Organizing workshops and other project events was undoubtedly more difficult for some project members than for others. Geography, as well as history, therefore conditioned the way participants were able to exercise their agency and, thus, in the way power was distributed.

Structural conditions also impacted in more subtle ways. Partners from some South African universities were able to walk onto a campus anywhere in Europe as well as onto some campuses in South Africa and immediately connect to the internet using Eduroam (sometimes even before they entered the buildings in which meetings were to take place) because their home institutions had configured local systems and email addresses. Others struggled and needed to request guest login access from their hosts. Sitting in a meeting room where some participants were announcing 'I'm on' (in the sense of being 'on the internet') without even understanding, in some cases, how this could be possible must have been disempowering for some project members.

Project funding for resources such as computers and software including video editing programs was available, and even abundant, but, even here, problems arose. The requirements imposed by funders were compounded by procurement processes imposed by some institutions. Some partners therefore struggled to spend the funding available to them because of the bureaucratic complexity of the processes with which they needed to engage and the lack of efficient institutional support that would have enabled them to do so.

This meant that participants from South African institutions with well-functioning, long-established administrative systems benefitted more easily from the funding. This observation extended to the ability to process travel bookings. On at least one occasion, project members from one university were uncertain that they would be able to join the rest of the group because flights and other transport had not been booked by their own institutions. This also impacted on arrangements for getting visas for international travel as, in South Africa, this involved the need for those living in remote locations to travel to big cities for visa appointments. Some universities were able to advance funding to allow project participants to travel before any funding was received from the project. At others, institutional authorities refused to allow tickets to be purchased until money had arrived from funders. Structural constraints experienced by project participants as they tried to use exercise their agency to pursue project goals correlated with location with the historically disadvantaged South African universities experiencing more problems than other partners.

These constraints were not only related to South African history, however, as EU rules and institutional processes also provided an impediment to the exercise of agency. These rules and processes related to the payment of Value Added Tax (VAT), the need to follow strict procurement processes and to keep paper trails. By the end of the project, it was evident that these had simply overwhelmed some participants without strong supportive administrative systems with the result that some funding had not been accessed. Observations regarding structural constraints lead to a call for in-depth interrogation of institutional environments by project leaders at inception stage and for plans which will mitigate some of the problems anticipated. Critically, they also have implications for funders themselves and the need to interrogate assumptions about what a project can achieve given the constraints it also imposes. Other work supports this point. Moyo (2018) and Muthama (2019) both indicate that administrative and management capacity is key to the (under)spending of funding at South African universities.

The structural mechanisms imposed by the EU funders also impacted on the extent to which project participants felt they were equal. European Union funding allows for a daily rate to be paid to institutions for work contributed to the project by their employees. 'Work' encompasses activities such as attendance at meetings, the facilitation of workshops and management fees. Daily rates, however, are related to salaries in the countries in which the institutions employing project members were located. This meant that Dutch, Scottish, or German universities were compensated at the rate of EUR 294 per day for their employees' engagement on the project, whilst the rates for those from

Turkey and South Africa were EUR 88 and EUR 74 respectively. Although this might have made sense logically because of differences in the cost of living and academic salary scales in each country, the vast disparity in daily rates could be experienced as indicative of the value of the partners who were all sitting in the same room engaged in the same activities. This practice could also be seen to draw on discourses focusing on a distinction between the 'developed' and the 'underdeveloped' discussed in the introduction of this paper which merited the 'developed' being paid more for their expertise than those who were its recipients.

The important lesson to be learned from the analysis above is that the mere availability of funding was insufficient to allow for participation in the project by all on equal terms. Other mechanisms, put in place by the funders and the partner universities, must come into play to allow the funding to be accessed and used.

The impact of social dynamics

Apparent disparities in the way individuals and institutions engaged with project activities led to the emergence of a discourse centred on the notion of accountability. This discourse can be seen to mask a sense of resentment, on the part of some, that not all participants contributed to project goals equally. The attendance at project meetings, the offering of project workshops and the development of online materials was highly uneven by institution. Uneven participation was picked up by the project evaluators who noted in their report (on page 12) that

Tighter project plans with more explicit roles and responsibilities for all partners would have increased accountability.

When participants appeared to resist engagement with the project tasks, it was perhaps inevitable that those with whom they were partnered should develop negative perceptions without necessarily seeking to understand the reasons for their apparent inaction. What appears to have happened in relation to the 'discourse of accountability' evident in comments made by some project participants is that failures at an institutional level were extended to be understood as failures at an individual level.

The evaluation report (on page 12) makes a specific recommendation in relation the points raised above by noting that

A stronger focus on specific institutional environments at partner universities and stronger integration of university leadership with the purpose to identify specific needs at individual institutions would have been good to strengthen ownership.

The evaluators therefore appear to be calling for the identification of structural constraints at project planning stage and this is something that should be born in mind in the future. However, what they do not note is the need for an open discussion of the way structural constraints may impact on participation amongst all partners to challenge the emergence of negative discourses constructing the lack of full participation as a lack of accountability.

Interestingly, it was not only the uneven participation of partners in the South that captured the attention of the evaluators since they also noted (on page 13), quoting interviewees, that,

... erratic patterns of participation from 'some European partners have disappointed'.

However, they also noted that,

... there have been 'sterling inputs on specific assignments'

What would appear to be the case, therefore, is that the 'sterling inputs' from some European partner institutions were used as mitigation for poor participation by others. This observation brings us back to Archer's point that all individuals have concerns and develop projects in which they can exercise their agency to pursue these concerns. At some institutions, project 'champions' emerged early on. These individuals were able to direct their agency at institutionalising the project and contributing materials. At others, participants came and went. This leads us to suggest that, in some cases, the motive for agreeing to participate may well have lain in departmental or institutional goals and needs and not necessarily in a complementarity between the project's focus on postgraduate environments and the individual's personal project. What was critical, it would seem, was the extent to which participants 'bought into' the project because of personal concerns about postgraduate education as it was this which impacted not only on their willingness to contribute but also on the extent of their participation.

Learning from South to North

Arguably, and drawing on comments made in early sections of this paper, the dominant direction of learning in the project was structured within the funding process as being from institutions in the Global North to those in the South. While power imbalances have the potential to be structured into development projects funded by the Global North, the ways in which these play out is largely dependent on the agency of individuals. While some Global North partners saw their role as active and equal partners in the endeavour, others were somewhat surprised that this particular project expected them to function as 'learners' and 'collaborators' and not only as 'knowers' and 'advisors'.

The evaluation report also notes that:

[a] European partner initiative underway is for one of the graduate schools to consider a training programme in academic skills for international students, drawing from [the project]. As one of the largest universities taking in first generation students, especially immigrant students, the institution reports having very similar diversity issues to South African universities.

While the notion that the project in the Global South could inform practice in the Global North might be applauded, this particular construction of the possible influence is troubling. Many educational researchers in South Africa have long rejected the idea that the solution to students' 'problems' lies in the provision of special classes in areas such as academic skills, the notion of which is, in any case, contested in favour of the idea of academic practices, closely related to shifts in identity (Boughey, 2007, 2012; Boughey & McKenna, 2021).

Elsewhere McKenna and Boughey (2017) draw on research to note that not all students have the privilege of being immersed in research rich environments,

The ways in which postgraduate students are positioned in departments varies extensively. In some cases, these students teach classes, offer seminars, attend staff teas and are generally seen to be novice members of the academy. Rich exposure to an academic environment inevitably impacts on the development of students' research capacity. In other cases, students are treated very bureaucratically and permitted little engagement beyond scheduled sessions with their individual supervisors. They are not allowed into staff rooms and are expected to call their supervisors by their titles (Doctor or Professor).

From this perspective, successful postgraduate student development focuses on the knowledge systems of the particular discipline or topic area and its associated practices. This would be undertaken through explicit exposure, deliberation, and feedback and not through generic workshops on 'academic skills.'

The majority of the European universities involved in the project on which this paper is based were 'research-intensive' and it is highly likely that they were able to offer the kind of environments conducive to students' acquisition of research values and practices. However, the lesson from the project deemed valuable to the Global North partners focused on the need to provide 'programmes in academic study skills' for international students. We argue that what is actually needed is a consideration of how these students are excluded from the contexts in which they are studying. Arguably, the fact that funding was provided by an entity in the dominant Global North positioned agents in the project within particular power relations that constrained the possibility for learning in a south to north direction.

It is not the case, however, that learning from the Global South was entirely absent. Looking back over the two projects noted in this paper, it is clear that a number of conditions promote the

kind of respect that favours learning flows in both directions. The first is the length of sustained engagement. Those partners who worked together over the two projects not only developed trust and respect for each other but also the amount of time spent working together meant that northern partners could become more familiar with contexts in the south and the thinking and understanding developed by their partners there. A second condition relates to the personal projects of those agents from the Global North. If they subscribe to an idea of superiority, then learning is unlikely to occur in a south to north direction; on the other hand, if they see themselves as fellow academics working together in a complex world, such learning is made possible. A third condition favouring south to north learning is when southern partners are themselves academics with strong research records and fairly senior positions in their home universities. Their experience not only as researchers but as institutional leaders make partners, who might otherwise assume dominance, more open to listening and learning.

Conclusion

As we conclude this paper it is necessary to make several very important points. The first is that although much of the analysis in this study has not been positive, it is certainly not the case that the experiences of participants were entirely negative or that the project was not successful. As we have indicated, the project which has been the focus of this paper drew on a previous project. Since the paper was begun, funding for another (third) project drawing on what has been learned from the previous two has been awarded by the European Union.

It is also certainly *not* the case that this paper is arguing against involvement in international projects. Rather, our position is that international projects, as others have noted, are complex and have the potential to be problematic. Most importantly, the paper points to the need for ongoing learning as international collaborators work together and for careful reflection on past work as we move forward. Writing the paper has been an important learning process for us especially given the position of South Africa in African affairs. Although South Africa is no longer the largest economy on the continent (having been overtaken by Nigeria), it exerts enormous influence in many areas including academia, and we will need to be alert to our own critique as we engage with our partners from Kenya in the new project. Our hope is that the analysis offered in this paper will be of use to others embarking on international projects.

Author Biographies

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