
UK-AFRICA: New guide to higher education partnerships

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North-South partnerships between educational institutions are viewed as an important way in which the human and institutional capacity of African universities can be improved. But building and maintaining successful partnerships that can work within and challenge the tenacious asymmetries of global power, resources and capabilities often require sensitive planning and attention to detail.

A recent report by the Africa Unit based at the Association of Commonwealth Universities in the United Kingdom, grapples with the concept of an effective UK-Africa educational partnership and emphasises the importance of a shared sense of ownership, an appreciation by both parties of local context, and the need for all partnerships to be demand-driven and sustainable.

Although intended for a wide audience, authors of the report titled *Good Practices in Educational Partnership: Guide: UK-Africa higher and further education partnerships* express the hope that African institutions will find the publication "of particular value".

Based in part on discussions with individuals from the UK and Africa who are involved in partnerships, a survey and literature reviews, the report is a clear and practical attempt to equalise the power balance between north-south collaborative ventures.

It emphasises the need for universities in the south to drive partnership processes, rather than become victims of partnership models characterised by a "one-way flow of development knowledge", which undermine the capacity of the African institution as autonomous learning organisations in their own right.

To this end, the second section of the guide is dedicated to providing step-by-step assistance to institutions seeking to set up lasting partnerships across continental boundaries. It supplies practical guidelines for identifying and understanding the rationale for a partnership, finding a suitable partner, negotiating the partnership and applying for the requisite funding.

Thereafter, with support from case study extracts and interviews with individual partners, the guide sets out in detail the 10 partnership principles of management and good governance which are shared by successful UK-Africa partnerships.

The principles are: shared ownership, trust and transparency; mutual understanding of cultural and working environments; a clear division of roles and responsibilities; effective and regular communication; joint strategic planning and implementation; commitment from staff and management; a supportive institutional infrastructure; monitoring and evaluation; and sustainability.

While they encourage an element of flexibility in their application, the guide's authors suggest that addressing the principle of sustainability (particularly financial) of any partnership is non-negotiable. "Unless there is a clear plan around sustainability (and particularly financial) the partnership will not succeed," they state.

Based on the 10 principles, the authors argue for a definition of an effective educational partnership as "a dynamic collaborative process" which brings mutual though not necessarily symmetrical benefits to all parties.

Partners, they argue, share ownership of the projects, and their relationship is based on respect, trust, transparency and reciprocity. Effective partners, they contend, understand their partners' cultural and working environments; decisions are made jointly after "real negotiations". Each partner understands what they are bringing to the partnership and their expectations of it.

Critically, they suggest, successful partnerships evolve over time, going beyond the concept of borrowing or replication towards knowledge sharing and mutual learning.

Most UK-Africa partnerships surveyed for the guide are research-based collaborations and staff development projects operating at the level of higher education rather than at the level of vocational or technical education.

The survey found that most UK institutions were motivated to partner with African institutions as a means to engage with the current internationalisation process in higher education, to pursue research excellence and explore opportunities for staff to work in new and different socio-political and cultural contexts.

For African institutions, on the other hand, the benefits of partnerships include the potential of attracting joint funding and building institutional capacity through professional development for staff and the mentoring of younger researchers. The report notes that it is also believed partnerships hold the potential to help African institutions achieve developmental goals, given the vital role of higher and further education sectors in this area.

Among the chief challenges facing UK partners, the report notes, is lack of time on the part of individuals to dedicate to the partnerships. UK academics, it says, are under intense pressure to publish academically and in many cases face heavy teaching loads. Lack of institutional support is also cited as lacking in some cases.

In Africa, challenges facing individuals involved in partnerships include heavy teaching loads, low wages and rising student enrolments without concomitant increases in institutional resources.

Unequal institutional resources between partners also present challenges to partnerships, which manifests in various ways including difficulties in attempts to cost-share. In addition, while access to computers is taken for

granted in the UK, information technology is a serious constraint to the efficiency and communication capacities of many African institutions.

The report also argues that funding schemes attached to partnerships are frequently short-term and do not sustain either the partnership, or the long-term cumulative process of capacity building.

"More sustainable funding schemes and longer term projects need to be considered in the future as a means of placing capacity building in its different manifestations as a greater element of UK-Africa partnerships," the report states.