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Is North–South university collaboration caught between conflicting objectives? Henrik Secher–Marcussen and Britha Mikkelsen elaborate on the increasingly challenging situation of sustaining international North–South partnerships.
Over the past 15–20 years, several European countries have supported university-to-university partnership programmes through their aid programmes. The goal of such programmes is that they develop into equal partnerships while supporting capacity building within universities in the South. The objectives have included the development of research and teaching capacities in the South, which should answer national development needs and at the same time better position higher education and research institutions to meet the challenges of globalisation. For universities in the North, the motivation for researchers/teachers to get involved has been a mix of international solidarity, idealism and individual commitment rather than seeing such involvement as part of an academic career strategy.

Traditional University Collaboration Programmes Challenged

North–South collaboration programmes in research and higher education, funded by national aid programmes, have generally functioned well and provide numerous benefits to universities in the South. However, the traditional, even orthodox, capacity development measures, such as provision of infrastructure (computers, labs and libraries), curriculum development, establishment of graduate programmes, student and staff exchanges, etc – all with the longer-term objective of promoting joint research projects and publications – are currently being challenged in the North as well as in the South.

With policies changing in the North and contexts of partner countries changing in the South, this collaboration modality is at risk of coming to an end unless remedial action is taken. This was the conclusion of a recently conducted evaluation in Norway of two programmes – the Norwegian Programme for Development, Research and Education (NUFU) and Norad’s Programme for Master Studies (NOMA).

Challenges in the North (Norway)

Norwegian universities, like many other universities in Europe, are faced with the implementation of a university reform, which entails new output- and results-based funding mechanisms and less core funding. A positive bottom line is required and, in order to stay in business, universities, faculties and departments need to be earning money as separate profit centres. The individual researchers, likewise, need to focus on their own academic careers in order to remain in business, through publications, generating external funding, bridging to society and societal needs in general, appearing in public, promoting and disseminating research results, etc. The unfortunate implications are extensive in the European university context. But in Norway, additional challenges apply.

In Norway, a particularly complex organisational structure reflects more fundamental issues and problems. One of the most intriguing and unresolved problems is who ‘owns’ the collaboration programmes between the Norwegian and Southern universities – the Ministry of Education and Research, or the Ministry of Foreign Affairs/Norad? The funding of the programmes is derived from the aid budget of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs and is handled by Norad, who again has outsourced this programme component to an independent institution – SIU (The Norwegian Centre for International Cooperation in Higher Education). The latter is administered under the aegis of the Ministry of Education, who nominates members of the SIU Board, but with no funding attached.

Aid Policy Priorities or Academic Priorities?

The organisational complexity in this case may be specific but it illustrates a more general issue, namely whether North–South university collaboration is established in order to meet objectives set by the overall Norwegian aid policies and priorities, or whether it is set by the Ministry of Education and its ‘clients’, the universities, and according to university standards and requirements. Or both!

The organisational confusion and unsettled conflict of objectives are placing the otherwise relatively well-functioning
programmes in jeopardy. Such pro-
grammes, so appreciated in the South, are
at risk of coming to an end. Continued
involvement of the Norwegian research-
ers might not be sustained; incentives are
disappearing due to teachers/researchers
not being financially rewarded or compen-
sated for conducting development work.
Norad only covers direct expenses in aid
programmes. Compensation paid by the
Ministry of Education and Research only
materialises if students are attracted from
the South to enrol at Norwegian universi-
ties. Student enrolment in the programmes
in Norway, however, only happens in a few
cases as it contradicts the overall policy
that capacity building must take place in
the South. This is the explicit goal of the
NOMA programme, which funds the
establishment of Master programmes in
the South.

Adding to these challenges is the
increasingly complex development agenda,
where aid policies are part of foreign poli-
cy, encompassing aid in its more traditional
sense, but also security, international mi-
gation, global financial and trading issues,
food security, climate change, etc. In all of
this, research and education collaboration
programmes remain critically fragmented.

This greater diversity that is evolving
within the Southern university landscape
calls for a more flexible, diverse and varied
form of collaboration modality, where the
demands from the South reach beyond
the orthodox form of support for capacity
development.

Universities in the South who have
moved up the ladder of research and higher
education capacity tend to express their
priorities for external support differently.
Many can handle Master programmes
themselves and are no longer interested in
support from the North. They may want to
promote their university and their position
scientifically and attempt to move up the
ladder by giving priority to conducting ba-
sic research. Or they may wish to embark
upon programmes that target how best to
address the globalisation challenges and
opportunities.

These new developments are gradually
surfacing and challenge Northern uni-
viersities by requiring much more flexible
responses to demands, for which the cur-
rent capacities, funding mechanisms and
organisational structures in the North may
not be well suited. This was another of the
conclusions in the evaluation of the two
Norwegian programmes.

FLEXIBLE, DIFFERENTIATED SUPPORT
With the increasing differentiation in the
South presenting a much wider and more
varied picture, the demands from the
South are also being voiced more strongly.
It is requested that future collaboration
arrangements go beyond Northern policy
priorities, in this case Norway’s, and even
beyond the tying of aid to universities/re-
searchers in Norway.

The remedies needed in order to clarify
objectives and identify new collaboration
modalities should not, however, stand in
the way of continuous support to interna-
tional university collaboration. The role of
higher education and research in develop-
ment is as important as ever in this com-
plex, globalised world in which we live.