Internationalization of Higher Education (HE) in an Unequal Terrain: UDS and International Partnerships

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ABSTRACT

The development of international partnerships for teaching and research has become one of the most significant strategies for internationalization among universities across the globe. For African universities, this practice is even more imperative in light of the African Union's (AU) position that in order for Africa's universities to play their critical role in development, they 'will require partnerships not only with local and regional actors and stakeholders, but also with the universities, businesses and governments of the developed world' (NEPAD (New Partnership for Africa's Development), 2005). This paper examines the relations and nature of international partnerships as an expression of the internationalization of higher education in Ghanaian universities. Drawing on an analysis of partnership agreements between the University for Development Studies (UDS) and other institutions and interviews with partnership program officers and students, it argues that partnerships in higher education as often captured in the MOUs present enormous benefits in program design, implementation and outcomes, but that institutions in developing countries like UDS are often not equipped in terms of the structural arrangements to engage on equal footing with their partner institutions from the global north in order to maximize the intended mutual benefits they bring.

Keywords: Internationalization, International partnerships, Higher education institutions (HEIs), Global North.

Highlights of this paper

- The development of international partnerships for teaching and research has become one of the most significant strategies for internationalization among universities across the globe.
- This paper examines the relations and nature of international partnerships as an expression of the internationalization of higher education in Ghanaian universities.

1. INTRODUCTION

University campuses across the globe have generally responded to the globalization of education in coming to terms with the ever growing momentum around internationalization of higher education. This is evidenced by increased student and staff mobility and exchanges, the proliferation of international collaborative research projects and individual departmental efforts to diversify and internationalize programs and curricula. Like many institutions in the global south, the University for Development Studies (UDS) has not only embraced these developments but has made major strides in the arena through the forging of collaborative projects and partnerships with various international institutions across the continent, Asia, Europe, and North America. The assumption has often been that collaborating or partner institutions derive mutual benefits from such networks. However, empirical studies into the nature and ways in which these partnerships are forged and how that affect the benefits derived by the collaborating institutions in the global south remain scarce. Drawing on an analysis of partnership agreements between UDS and other institutions, interviews and extended conversations with specific partnership program officers in the UDS, this paper examines the relations and nature of international partnerships and the structural arrangements that ensure program implementation. It argues that ideally partnerships in higher education as often captured in the MOUs present enormous benefits in program designs, implementation and outcomes, but that institutions in developing countries like UDS are often not equipped and or prepared in terms of the structural arrangements to engage on equal footing with their partner institutions from the global North[1] to maximize or take advantage of the intended mutual benefits they bring.

In doing this, the paper begins with a brief discussion of the different conceptualizations of internationalization in higher education, highlighting in particular, which conception is salient in developing country institutions like UDS. It also examines the benefits from these partnerships in relation to the nature, design and management of international partnerships formed Vis a Vis the structural arrangements within the context of UDS. It concludes by teasing out precautionary measures and mechanisms for participating to ensure maximum benefits for partner institutions.

1.1. Differentiated Meanings of Internationalization

Internationalization is not a new term, nor is the debate over its meaning. Internationalization has been used for years in political science and governmental relations, but its popularity in the education sector has soared only since the early 1980s. The term internationalization became part of the lexicon of HE in the late eighties and especially became formalized following the General Agreement on Trade in Services (GATS) conference in 2003. Following neo-liberal prescriptions of the world trade organization (WTO), the GATS sought to liberalize trade in goods and services in industries and in education. In particular, HE was defined in this agreement as 'an international service industry to be regulated through the marketplace and through international trade agreements'

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[1]Although some authors (see Aksnes, Frølich, and Slipersæter (2008)) have questioned the ability of the terms in addressing the complexities of geographic, economic and social positioning of countries and people, they still remain relevant in describing especially the power inequalities between and among nations. They are therefore used in this context, irrespective of the nuances in their application, to represent the unequal positions among partnering institutions.

(Bassett, 2006). As a consequence of this, internationalization became a buzz-word in university sectors across the world as institutions and nations prepared themselves to become strong and effective actors on a new global HE platform. Internationalization is a term that means different things to different people. For some people, it means a series of international activities such as: academic mobility for students and teachers; international networks, partnerships and projects; new international academic programs and research initiatives. For others it means the delivery of education to other countries through new arrangements such as branch campuses or franchises using a variety of face-to-face and distance techniques. To many, it means the inclusion of an international, intercultural and/or global dimension into the curriculum and teaching learning process. Still others see internationalization as a means to improve national or world rankings of their institution and to recruit the best and brightest of international students and scholars. Indeed, Internationalization is a complex and multifaceted concept, which makes precise definition elusive. All definitions, however, share a common perspective that it is about universities increasing the international dimension in all aspects of their work. Knight (2003) defines internationalization as '. . . the process of integrating international dimensions into teaching, research and service'. However, as globalization has intensified over the last few decades, organizations including HE have turned to internationalization as both a response to and a proactive way of meeting the demands of greater globalization, both in the immediate and as preparation for envisaged futures.

In her study of trends in the internationalization of higher education, Knight (2008) observes that the most important benefits of internationalization of global institutions listed in order of relevance were: increasing international awareness of students; strengthening research and knowledge production; and fostering international cooperation and solidarity. Although there is a multiplicity of strategies in different universities, there seems to be greater convergence on the understanding of the idea of internationalization than there is on the idea of globalization. While some emphasize the notion of cultural compatibility in education (Ebuchi, 1989) or the importance of providing an educational experience in an integrated global environment (Association of Universities and Colleges of Canada, 1993) it is Knight. and De Wit (2018) "integration of an international or intercultural dimension into the tripartite mission of universities in teaching, research and enterprise" that seems to have struck a resonance with scholars and practitioners in this area.

Whiles other conceptualizations of internationalization like students recruitment and movements have received intense interest and scrutiny in the literature, the practice of internationalization that "focus on the development of partnerships to reduce risk, increase competitiveness, enhance image and broaden the knowledge base for research, enterprise and education" (Teichler, 2004) has not seen a comparable attention. This version of internationalization however is most dominant in HE institutions in the global south because developing country universities like UDS often lack the infrastructural capacity to attract and recruit foreign students either from their own region or from the global north except for short term, mostly exchange programs. At the same time, scholars note the often inequitable direction of international education initiatives, in particular the North's or West's advantage in these endeavors that may do little more than perpetuate inequities in terms of access and opportunity. Altbach (2004) and Webber (2011) both raise the issue of institutional access in the South or East to resources and to publication that has resulted in certain universities and locations dominating research and funding. Although scholars like Hoey (2016) argue that international research partnerships exemplify " good internationalization" where both parties bring strengths to the table and both draw equal benefit from the outcome, I would like to argue in this paper that the benefits from such partnerships may not always be mutual and or equal even when partners bring their unique strengths to the table. This paper analyzes the nature and relationships of international partnerships in UDS in

order to explore the micro-dynamics of partnership agreements and implementation to examine how these dynamics benefit developing institutions like UDS in the global south.

How are these partnerships initiated and with which institutions? What is the nature of these collaborations and the micro dynamics between them?

The focus of this paper is on partnerships as an expression of internationalization in developing country institutions as opposed to study abroad or international students (aspects of internationalization commonly visible in institutions in the global North). This is further examined drawing on three salient benchmarks; looking at the design, management and development of partnerships between developing country institutions like UDS and those in the global north.

2. METHODS

Data for this paper is drawn from an analysis of MOUs between UDS and various international institutions between 2010 and 2018, interviews of senior and mid-level faculty and staff of UDS international office and other departments directly involved in the MOUs as well as interviews with students in selected units and departments In all, fifty MOUs between UDS and institutions across four continents; North America, South America, Asia and Africa were selected for this study. Ten MOUs each between UDS and institutions across the four continents were selected in order to understand what differences exists (if any) in terms of the questions above. The study also selected ten MOUs that represented Trans- regional and multinational organizations such as "Generations for Peace" to see if they differed from those above. A total of ten faculty members from three participating departments and units were also interviewed to ascertain their level of awareness and degree of participation in such partnerships. These departments/units cut across three campuses (Nyankpala, Tamale and Wa campuses) of the university. Group interviews of four students at a time were also carried out. Some were directly involved/beneficiaries of the partnership projects whiles others were not, but all were from the units and departments involved in the projects. A total of twenty four students, divided into six groups of four, were interviewed for this study. These results are then discursively analyzed.

2.1. International Partnerships and UDS internationalization

The development of international partnerships for teaching, including joint programs, offshore teaching and learning, collaborative research, entrepreneurship and development have become one of the most significant strategies for internationalization among universities across the globe. For African universities, this practice is even more imperative in light of the African Union's (AU) position that in order for Africa's universities to play their critical role in development, they 'will require partnerships not only with local and regional actors and stakeholders, but also with the universities, businesses and governments of the developed world' (NEPAD 2005).

Since its inception in 1992, UDS has forged various partnership agreements with institutions across the globe. A cursory review indicates that assessing sustainable development collaborations in higher education often tend to concentrate on near-term and readily quantifiable inputs and outputs – such as the number of partnerships entered, development courses offered, professionals trained, grant proposals generated, reports issued, and financial returns on investments (Chapman & Moore, 2010; Deardorff & Adinda, 2012; Mundy & Francine, 2012). Existing assessment tools devote little attention to curriculum, teaching and capacity development (Yarime & Tanaka, 2012). In his theoretical work on the evaluation of donor-supported development projects for instance, Smith (2000) points out that 'some projects may achieve their objectives but not have any great impact on the community, while others may not achieve their objectives but nevertheless have a beneficial impact – possibly even greater than was foreseen

by the original design'. This insight calls attention to the importance of focusing on how projects work in a given context. This paper draws on Koehn and Uitto (2015) framework for symmetrical evaluations of partnerships between institutions in the global north and those in the south to examine the nature, design and management of UDS partnerships. Their framework builds upon three salient benchmarks that focus on what they call the "mutually conceptualized and planned arrangement for the partnership and its projects" (p5). They argue that northern funders preference for standardized metrics for evaluating projects and their exclusive determination of baseline project indicators often put pressure on developing institutions like USD to borrow customized and externally determined indicators, which narrows opportunities to conduct contextually based and culturally responsive evaluations. Citing Stoecker (2005) they note that the education sector and program evaluations are even more problematic than specific project evaluations are because they are 'not developed, implemented, and evaluated through a careful research process with the involvement of the people they are purportedly designed to impact' (Koehn & Uitto, 2015). This section looks at how UDS partnerships affect the curriculum, teaching and capacity development of both participating units and individuals. These changes leave a more sustainable impact on especially developing country institutions like UDS but are often overlooked in the implementation and assessment of partnership programs. In doing so, the paper examines the nature, design and management practices of these partnerships in order to unearth the extent of benefits often outlined in the MOUs. Although these issues are discussed separately in this section, they are not mutually exclusive.

2.2. Nature, Design and Management of UDS Partnerships

The funding for these partnerships almost always lie with the external partners, with UDS agreeing to contribute mostly in the form of human resources and or materially in the form of infrastructure facilities. In analyzing the design of partnership programs, Catley-Carlson (2004) has argued that the first evaluative criteria to be applied should specifically consider whether or not the expectations and justifications advanced for engaging in collaboration outweighed the arguments in favor of unilateral implementation (Catley-Carlson, 2004). In general, UDS' collaborations can be grouped into those with higher education institutions (HEIs) which constitute the majority of partnerships and nongovernmental, philanthropic organizations (NGPOs) .The exchange of teaching and research personnel and or students and the development of courses or programs of mutual interest constitute a critical part in both types of partnerships. However, with regards to collaborations with NGPOs, the focus is often geared towards the award of grants to support and or promote research in specific areas of interests (agreed upon). The question however is whether these interest areas are already existing; i.e.: ongoing fields in UDS or newly created interests?

Interviews and cursory documentary analysis indicate that most of UDS partnerships forged with NGPOs take the form of external parties finding existing programs in UDS that fit into their own interests and thus enter into agreements to nurture and further develop for mutual benefits. When this happens, the partnership is often sustained over a longer period with few lapses on expected outcomes. As a head of a department in a collaborative project notes,

" when an organization recognizes and shows interest in a project that is already ongoing, it really becomes a win-win for all because senior members are more motivated and committed to speed up the work. They don't have to take time off their regular schedules to engage in this extra task which may not be in their area of specialization" (JL-interview, July 2017).

When it comes to partnerships between UDS and other higher education institutions however, the initial contact often comes from individual networks by faculty members or management officials with other HEIs.

Discussions ensue and eventually common projects are fashioned out. In such partnerships, groups and or departments try to redefine and tailor their objectives and interests to fit the interest areas of the funding partners. When this happens, the participation and interests of individuals especially research and teaching staff fizzle out after the initial euphoria with which objectives are designed. A senior member in one of the social science program describes how a partnership program between the faculty and another faculty in a European university worked;

"we were introduced to this research project that many of us knew nothing about and were told it would bring tremendous benefits to the faculty. This was a completely new area to many of us, but somehow we went along with the project, some of us longer than others, but eventually many of us found out it was a waste of our precious time.". (JL interview, June, 2017)

Several faculty members in this particular program acknowledged that not enough sensitization/education was given to senior members prior to the introduction of the project.

Asked why they went along with the project if it did not fall in their line of research, he responded;

" you see, there were many factors. Some of us were called to attend the initial familiarization meeting with the European group. We got curious about what they were saying, but the way it was done, it was as if you were being favored if you were asked to join, so you want to also proof that you were worthy of the favor."

Even though students' participation in partnership programs often reflect compatibility in terms of field of study, interviews with students showed that some students had motives different from those outlined in the MOUs. Contrary to the objectives in some MOUs emphasizing students' academic and career development and training for instance, some students had the intensions of using the exchange programs to migrate into Europe or North America and when such 'dreams" where not realized, they lost interest in completing the tasks necessary for a successful partnership program. A few students acknowledged the fact that they explored opportunities to stay back during their exchange trips but failed. One student beneficiary of an exchange "it's just that I didn't have anybody already living in Europe when I was there"

The need for shared vision between partner institutions and individuals in partnerships cannot be overlooked in this sense and efforts to ensure proper alignment of visions need to be taken seriously. In her paper on research partnerships and their evaluations, Stone (2004) notes that evaluation questions should focus on inclusiveness, transparency, internal academic legitimacy (Calder & Clugston, 2004) and a shared vision among partners and community stakeholders of what the partnership aimed to achieve. Other design questions should focus on the incentives and rewards integrated into partnership plans (Catley-Carlson, 2004; Klitgaard, 2004). A review of the MOUs often show some level of agreement between partners in relation to shared visions between partner faculties/departments of UDS and the institutions they collaborate with. But in depth discussions reveal that institutions like UDS are often influenced by their funding/economic weakness to retool their visions to suit the funding institutions from the global north. Issues of transparency and inclusivity especially in relation to incentives and rewards in such partnerships are often overlooked, but invariably at the heart of the success or failure of any program.

The data indicates that the anticipated benefits from these collaborations often center on capacity building, students' development and training and infrastructure development. When it comes to student selection and participation however, the study shows that these are often assumed benefits that do not actually reflect what pertains on the ground in that, the benefits of these partnerships vary for individual participating student. For example, partnership programs that are supposed to send students to partner institutions on exchange are often shrouded in so much arbitrariness that students do not understand the basis of their selection neither do participating faculty. In UDS, interviews with both participating and non-participating students in partner

programs indicate that most students do not know what it takes to be selected as candidate for inclusion. Some of those who were selected to participate thought it was based on academic excellence, interest and ability to pay related costs. They however could not be sure that they were outstanding in these three areas over their colleagues who were not selected. In fact sometimes, students selected to take part in these exchange programs do not even meet the initial minimal agreed upon criteria to participate in such activities. For instance, some participating students in an exchange program meant for a particular faculty were not even enrolled in any program in that faculty. How then did they get into such a program? A follow up on the participation of such students revealed that the selection process was decided by only one person or a team that is highly influenced often by, the supervising coordinator or " Boss" of such partnerships. Such students were excited to be part of only some aspects of the program (often the "foreign travel") but not the other parts of it. It was not surprising to realize that in a five year partnership program that provided for a total of fifty students from partner institutions (10 students per year) benefiting from academic exchange programs that led to some joint degree/double degree awards, not a single student from UDS was able to accomplish such a task in the program's life span. On the contrary, over 90% (46 students) of students who took part from the partner institutions in the global north graduated with joint/double degrees. Apart from the individual students' experiences and memories of such exchanges, there is very little to show for such partnership with reference to the students' academic development in UDS.

In terms of capacity building of staff and infrastructure, in most cases, just few handful of faculty from the local institutions are handpicked usually by the coordinator/director of the partnership on a criteria that is based on "clientelism" and not necessarily qualification or the need for further enhancement of teaching or research skills. Several faculty members who participated in one partner project or the other attested to this fact. Some indicated that they were handpicked to take part, but were never told why.

"Sometimes, it can be very frustrating; you are asked to take part in a project you know very little about and then you now have to do a 'crush' study on it in order to be able to contribute. Otherwise you will go in there and these 'white guys' will be saying a bunch of things and you know how they will handle things…..they assume you have all been exposed to the same information and material. Then they will ask you what you think, and then you just sit there or get up and make a fool of yourself" (JL interview, 7/22/ 17).

Once they discovered that the projects were not in line with their research interests and more importantly, no transparency in how projects are managed, many felt it was a waste of time and ultimately quit. Turnover among faculty and staff in such projects is often high as individual interests fizzle and new members added onto the team. This does not forster sustained capacity development among faculty. Apart from a few cases of interpersonal networks between UDS faculty and participating faculty from partnership projects that have resulted in joint research publications, rarely do faculty members stay on such projects to internalize new skills or knowledge in order to achieve one of the key objectives often expressed in the memoranda of understanding. It is also important to understand like Koehn and Uitto (2015) notes that "co-authorship does not directly capture the complex dynamics, scope, or sustainable development effects of collaboration among partners and external stakeholders" (p. 4).

There might be more visible impact in terms of infrastructure development where strict accountability measures are put in place to ensure that local partner institutions show concrete evidence of improvements in infrastructure emanating from the partnership. In one of the partnership projects in a social science faculty, building the library capacity of the faculty in terms of specific number of books and library equipment throughout the duration of the partnership was clearly worked into the framework and concrete evidence had to be shown by UDS to that effect. Other projects led to the building of new plants and equipments which have become assets to the

university. Even so, such evidence can be subject to the manipulations of the local coordinator if triangulation mechanisms are not put in place to verify such claims.

Interviews and informal conversations with some faculty members in several departments and programs that run these partnerships, revealed that many faculty who were purported to be collaborating members knew next to nothing about the financial or budgetary details of the programs they were taking part in. No single faculty member knew how much they were entitled to as part of their involvement in the program, neither did they try to find out. When asked why they did not try to find out, some said the fear of being branded "nosy" and possibly removed from the program was one reason. Some members cited instances of other faculty members who were "dropped" from the program because they were perceived to be "querying" and prying too much. As one male faculty noted ; "if you ask too many why questions, you won't be part of the show in the next season" (JL Interview: 22/6/2017).

In terms of management of partnerships, Koehn and Uitto (2015) have argued for continuous monitoring in collaborative partnership programs to ensure that the overall aims are 'still synergized' and participants are utilizing key data related to performance indicators. Continuous monitoring in their view, provides managers and stakeholders with regular feedback on the consistency or discrepancy between planned and actual activities and on the internal and external factors affecting results (UNDP 2011; cited in Koehn and Uitto (2015)). They propose the use of participatory evaluation tools in order to assess the perceived extent of participation in, and influence of, stakeholders on a particular project. This study obviously indicates that very little if any monitoring is carried out on partnerships much less participatory.

3. CONCLUSION: IMPLICATIONS FOR IMPLEMENTATION AND EVALUATION

The University for Development Studies in its over twenty five years of existence has entered into several partnership programs with various institutions and organizations. But very little review, much less expanded evaluations have been done to ascertain the extent of benefits the university has gained over time. The aim of this paper is to shed some light on some of the actual reasons and contextual relationships that are responsible for outcomes and impacts.

In principle, UDS like many institutions in the global south often have the systems in place to design, manage and implement effective collaborative activities with external partners in order to maximize/enhance the benefits to all stakeholders .However, these partnership projects often ignore the complexity of interests, relationships, and institutional practices in their design and implementation and are often left to be carried out based on the moral ethos of the institutions involved with little or no accountability measures and punitive structures to ensure fair, just and effective implementation. The inherent culture of greed, clientelism and nepotism often subvert these established systems, resulting in outcomes that may not be captured by the policy validating narratives often constructed by "interpretive communities" (Mosse, 2004).

The tensions expressed in the findings illustrate the complexity of the field and emphasize the need for careful investigation of the aims that are driving internationalization, especially international partnerships and demand consideration of the possibly unintended results and negative implications noted by Knight (2004). It should provide assessments of what works and why, in what context, highlight intended and unintended results, and provide strategic lessons to guide decision makers and inform stakeholders.

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