Patterns of Relationships in North-South Higher Education Partnerships: A Pathway to Mutuality

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Abstract: *This study examines the patterns of relationships in North-South higher education partnerships, emphasizing the experiences and perspectives of the Southern partner. Employing a comparative case study design, the research explores two cases of partnerships between universities in Ethiopia and Norway, involving interviews with 40 participants as well as a review of relevant documents. The analysis maps out how the partnerships are formed and functioning, comparing the two cases in terms of the positioning and agency of the Southern partners. The findings indicate that North-South higher education partnerships are shaped not only by structural factors but also by context-specific elements embedded in the local environments. These context-embedded factors are found to be crucial for challenging the problematic consequences of inherent asymmetries in the partnerships and, thus, for paving the way for more mutual collaborations.*

Keywords: *higher education; partnership; North-South higher education partnership; mutuality; Ethiopia; higher education partnership*

Introduction

Ethiopia has a long history of traditional education linked to the Orthodox Church and Islamic Mosques (Bishaw & Melesse, 2017). However, the modern Western-style higher education system in Ethiopia has a shorter history of about seven decades, with the establishment of the University College of Addis Ababa (now Addis Ababa University) in 1950. Besides, the expansion and development of higher education remained slow until the 2000s. However, over the last three decades, the Ethiopian government has undertaken tremendous reforms in higher education to produce competent graduates who can help transform Ethiopia into a middle-income country by 2025 (Teferra et al., 2018). Several reform initiatives have been undertaken, including the expansion of higher education institutions (HEIs), the implementation of successive Education Sector Development Programs, the enactment of the Higher Education Proclamation, the establishment of the Higher Education Relevance and Quality Agency and Higher Education Strategic Center, the introduction of cost-sharing and privatization measures, the diversification of academic programs, and others (Kassie, 2020).

These reforms have resulted in a massive expansion of higher education and improved access. For instance, the number of universities has increased from just two in 1996 to 60 today, and undergraduate student enrolment has increased from 56,072 in 2003 to 825,003 in 2018 (Ministry of Education, 2018). This expansion has also presented a number of challenges, including shortages of skilled faculty, resource constraints, limited research and innovation capacities, high graduate unemployment, and declining overall quality (Bishaw & Melesse, 2107). These challenges have hindered the sector's ability to fully support Ethiopia's aspirations of becoming a middle-income country by 2025. In response, Ethiopian higher education has pursued international partnerships to address such issues of strengthening research capacities and improving educational qualities.

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Given that North-South higher education partnerships (HEPs) have emerged as a strategy to revitalize African higher education, many Ethiopian HEIs have established partnerships with various Northern counterparts. These partnerships are often supported by the development partners. For example, the development agencies of Norway, Sweden, and the USA are among the key players that have provided financial and technical support to such partnerships in Ethiopia (Teferra, 2014).

This study focuses on examining international HEP experiences in Ethiopia, using two partnership programs formed between Ethiopian and Norwegian universities. The selection of partnerships with Norwegian HEIs is due to their extensive partnership history of over 30 years with Ethiopian HEIs (Nossum, 2017). Additionally, these partnerships represent North-South relations that lead to a question of power relations, while Norway's professed motivation for development assistance is humanitarianism (Hydén, 2017; Ishengoma, 2016). Yet, it is not known how far this claim practically conforms to and opens up spaces for the Southern institutions to exercise a relationship that transcends asymmetry.

The concept of partnership typically implies a positive and collaborative relationship, characterized by mutually agreed-upon arrangements that benefit all parties involved (Koehn & Obamba, 2014; Hanada, 2021). It is built upon the premise of mutual influence, co-ownership, joint decisions, mutual respect and trust, and mutual benefits. However, the extent to which such North-South HEPs embody equitable participation and mutual influence remains uncertain.

Broadly speaking, the literature on North-South HEPs reflects both positive and negative depictions. While an array of studies highlight the existence of power asymmetries inherent in these partnerships (Andriansen & Madsen, 2019; Lumb, 2023; Ishengoma, 2016), others argue for the potential symmetry and mutual influence within North-South partnerships (Koehn & Obamba, 2014; Leng, 2016; Mwangi, 2017). The positive view emphasizes the benefits of international partnerships as catalysts for higher education development. Studies within this category emphasize the enhancement of academic and research capacity and knowledge exchange (Jamil & Haque, 2017; Jooste, 2015; Koehn & Obamba, 2014). They portray the potential for equitable influence through genuine negotiation and consensus among partners. However, these studies tend to downplay the role of structural power dynamics in shaping relationships.

Conversely, another category of literature displays skepticism towards partnership premises, painting a negative or gloomier picture. Studies within this category often analyze North-South partnership dynamics from the perspective of structural factors (Ishengoma, 2016; Lumb, 2023). They view these partnerships as subtle forms of power imposition, serving to legitimize the role of Northern development agencies in directing the relationship. According to these studies, partnership programs often operate within a neo-colonial framework, leading to dependency on Southern partners, the dominance of Northern interests, and distortion of local agendas. For instance, Luthuli, Daniel and Corbin (2024) argue that North-South partnerships frequently carry colonial legacies. From this perspective, the promise of egalitarianism within the partnership is challenged by the inherent North-South asymmetries and paternalistic behaviors exhibited by Northern academics (Ishengoma, 2016; Luthuli et al, 2024). Such studies tend to overestimate the hegemony of political and economic structures in shaping partnership dynamics.

However, it is my contention that international HEPs are not necessarily uniformly established and operated, nor do they exhibit the same patterns. The actual context (Ledger & Kawalilak, 2020) plays a crucial role in envisioning some ways that transcend structural asymmetries. Nonetheless, the majority of studies in this field are rooted in Northern perspectives and authored by Northern scholars (Koehn & Obamba, 2014; Kot, 2016). There is a notable dearth of research exploring the viewpoints of Southern partners and the extent to which their voices contribute to shaping and sustaining partnerships that can work within the tenacious asymmetries of power (Koehn & Obamba, 2014; Kot, 2016). Furthermore, despite the prevalence of partnerships between Ethiopian HEIs and Northern counterparts, there is a limited availability of empirical studies (e.g., Kassie & Angervall, 2021) and agency-sponsored evaluation reports (e.g., Francisconi, Grundy & Mulloy, 2011).

Therefore, this study focuses on the experiences of Southern partners in North-South HEPs involving two Ethiopian universities, referred to as UA and UB, and a Norwegian university, referred to as NU. The study centers on two partnership programs (UA-NU and UB-NU) to investigate the patterns of relationships exhibited vis-à-vis issues of mutuality, based on the perspectives of the local partners. Specifically, the study aims to explore: (a) the formation and functioning of these partnerships; (b) the Southern partners' experiences within these partnerships, in light of their positioning; and (c) compares the degree of mutuality exhibited in the two partnerships, exploring how their distinct contextual factors may account for any variations observed.

The contribution of this study is that without ignoring the structural conception of North-South relations, it incorporates context-specific factors to enhance the understanding of the intricate nature of partnerships and to highlight potential avenues for challenging the problematic consequences of power asymmetries. It also provides implications, particularly for promoting mutuality within partnerships.

Theoretical Framework

While different actors within the global power structure may assume dominant or subordinate roles, it is important to recognize that this structure does not offer a completely deterministic explanation of international relations due to the heterogeneity and constant evolution of societies (Ledger & Kawalilak, 2020). Consequently, analyzing a specific international partnership requires a critical awareness not only of the historically embedded political and economic relations that contribute to asymmetries but also of contextual sensitivity. Of particular importance, this study focuses on partnerships supported by the Norwegian Development Agency (NORAD), which envisions shared responsibility and mutual relationships between Norwegian and African universities (Norad, 2017; Nossum, 2017). Therefore, the mutuality lens (Galtung, 1980; Hayhoe, 1986) is considered an appropriate theoretical framework for comprehending the patterns of relations in these partnerships. Mutuality is regarded as the antithesis of domination (Galtung, 1980) and is recognized as a crucial aspect of the relationship. Hayhoe (1986) adapted Galtung's structural-oriented goals of international relations, including equity, participation, autonomy, and solidarity, as a means to reduce power differentials and foster mutuality in international cooperation. Scholars such as Leng (2016), Leng and Pan (2013), and Mwangi (2017) have also employed the mutuality lens in studying North-South HEPs.

In the context of North-South HEPs, *equity* emphasizes the collaborative formulation of partnership arrangements and objectives, with joint agreement and consensus among the partners. Equity supports collaborative decision-making, shared responsibilities, and mutual benefits (Hayhoe, 1986; Leng, 2016). *Participation* advocates for the full engagement and contribution of the Southern partner in the partnership, rejecting restrictions and hierarchical relations (Hayhoe, 1986; Mwangi, 2017). *Autonomy highlights* the importance of partners respecting each other's values, norms, and working cultures (Mwangi, 2017). This necessitates the Northern partners' acknowledgement of the contributions made by the Southern partner and the benefits derived from the partnership (Leng, 2016). *Solidarity* suggests partnership forms that foster strong interactions between partners and facilitate further interconnections among the Southern partners and members (Leng, 2016). Thus, the framework of mutuality is employed as a lens to comparatively examine the two partnerships, focusing on the roles and positioning of the Southern partners in shaping the relationship.

Design and Method

This study employs a comparative case study design. This design is helpful for an in-depth understanding of the experiences of the two partnerships, treating each as a case (Yin, 2011), and for better understanding the subtle differences between them (Bryman, 2012). From a pool of 11 partnerships involving universities from Ethiopia and Norway, two specific partnership programs, namely UA-NU and UB-NU, were selected as representative cases (Mwangi, 2017). The selection

criteria were based on contextual similarities and differences. Both partnerships involved 'first generation' universities (UA and UB) that were assumed to have more extensive partnership experience, focused on capacity building, funded by NORAD, and had similar project durations from 2013 to 2020. These cases were deemed comparable due to their shared goals (Goodrick, 2014) and commonalities in terms of data sources and constructs (Steiner-Khamsi, 2002). However, they differed in partnership areas, activities, and institutional capacity, which may or may not account for variations in their relationship patterns.

The study employed semi-structured interviews with a purposefully selected group of 40 individuals who possessed significant experience in the partnerships, comprising 20 participants from each case. The participants included six administrators, 18 academics, and 16 graduate students (12 PhD and two Master's students). The interviews with administrators focused on their roles in initiating, scrutinizing, and approving the partnerships. Interviews with academics delved into their perspectives on their roles and experiences in the partnerships relative to their foreign counterparts. The interviews with graduate students focused on their personal experiences and the benefits they derived from the partnerships. The study also employed a review of documents, such as memoranda of understanding (MOUs), agreements, partnership proposals (of UA-NU and UB-NU), progress reports, and meeting minutes.

To establish trustworthiness, the study collected thick descriptive data and converging evidence from multiple data sources (principals, instructors, students, and documents) using two different methods: semi-structured interview and document review (Bryman, 2012). The interview data were then complemented by the review of relevant documents.

Data were analyzed using thematic analysis, which involves constructing an index of central themes and subthemes, identifying emerging themes through reading and rereading, and categorizing them accordingly (Bryman, 2012). First, the documents were reviewed to extract information regarding partnership objectives, activities, funding sources, partners' roles and responsibilities, contributions, progress, achievements, and challenges. This document analysis revealed several themes, including partnership initiation, formation, and functioning, which provided an overall understanding of the key concerns of the study. The interview data were then integrated with the document data and coded according to the themes identified during the document review.

The process involved single case analysis—exploring and describing the findings of each case within the context of the emerged themes—followed by cross-case analysis—synthesizing the results across the two cases and comparing them by juxtaposing.. Finally, employing the constant comparison method (Yin, 2011), the data were coded with respect to the constructs of equity, autonomy, solidarity, and participation, which emerged from the theoretical framework and interview guides. This allowed the study to identify similarities and nuances between the cases vis-à-vis issues of mutuality. Specific interviews are referenced using a number following UA and UB, denoting the respective universities.

Findings

This section provides the results, first presenting the overview of the two partnership programs, juxtaposed (see Appendix A), followed by a cross-case analysis.

How are the Partnerships Initiated and Formed?

The results show that previous institutional and personal ties as well as NORAD's call for funding contributed to the initiation of the UA-NU partnership, while prior personal relationships and NORAD's call for funding were linked to the initiation of the UB-NU partnership. As the then coordinator in UA responded:

Our relationship with [NU] professors started earlier in a research partnership where we worked together… They informed us about NORAD's announcement of funding applications. Then, we contacted them and discussed the development of a joint proposal and application for funding (UA5).

A coordinator in UB also described:

Prior to this partnership, there was a capacity-building partnership between [UB] and the U.S. institution, where I from [UB] and a professor from the U.S. (now a coordinator of this partnership in the Norwegian side) were members. It was at that time we discussed the possibilities of partnering. Later, through our initiation, our respective officials signed MOUs for working in partnership (UB25).

An administrator from UB added:

After MOUs and in response to NORAD's call for a seed grant application, we jointly applied for the seed grant. In late 2012, we won the seed grant. Using this grant, we identified our institutional needs and developed the partnership proposal; and again in 2013, we won the NORAD's main grant (UB23).

In both cases, faculty members from local partner institutions with prior links with their counterparts in foreign partner institutions initiated initial contacts and discussions regarding the possibilities for institutional partnerships. These individuals were subsequently appointed as coordinators within their respective institutions. These prior personal and institutional connections served as seed stock for the initiation and emergence of new partnerships, as also noted in Taylor (2016). These connections were particularly helpful in establishing initial awareness and understanding of the partners' interest in forming partnerships and signing Memorandums of Understanding (MOUs). However, it is important to note that in both cases, the decision to conduct needs assessments, identify partnership agendas, and develop partnership proposals was prompted by NORAD's call for applications. Interviewees (e.g., UA15 and UB37) also emphasized that securing external funding was a prerequisite for implementing the MOUs and carrying out the projects, which would have otherwise remained unrealized. The UB-NU partnership proposal (p. 3) also highlighted the role of NORAD's Seed Grant in supporting the "…need assessment and development of the proposal", indicating that while prior connections were significant at the initial stage, a call for external funding appeared to be played a decisive role for deciding proposal development and thus for establishing the partnerships.

Many participants in both cases mentioned that their institutions often partner with the Northern institutions. One reason for this is the expectation that working with the Northern partners, owing to their better status and experience, would give them a better opportunity for learning and achieving their capacity-building goals (UA1). Another reason is the desire to secure "*external funding for running the partnership projects*", as it is often through collaborations with Northern partners that funding is obtained (UB29). Participants frequently praised the financial contributions of Norway, which supported the organization of consultative meetings and exchange visits to enhance understanding of each other's needs and contributions. These communication activities were deemed "…instrumental for the partnership formation…" (UA-NU proposal, p. 4) and were valued for "broadening the liaison between" partners (UB-NU proposal, p. 3).

In addition, several participants mentioned that they were given the autonomy to assess and identify the needs of their institutions that could be addressed through the partnership. For example, an academic staff member from UA stated, "*They requested our interests and needs, we told them, then they accepted us with slight modifications*" (UA5). Similarly, it is described that NU gave precedence to the demands of UB.

First, the selected staff from our institution identified the partnership agendas and developed the draft partnership proposal. Then, the draft proposal was presented in the meeting, where other academics and institutional leaders of both parties participated by providing feedback. Accordingly, the proposal was modified. Finally, institutional leaders approved and signed the agreement (UB29).

In both cases, the local partners participated in identifying issues of local relevance, writing proposals, vetting the processes, and signing agreements (UA18, UA4, UB37, UB36). As such the partnership proposals entertain the needs of the local partners. Both the interview and the document indicated that the partnerships focused on building the capacity of the local institution through graduate training, joint research, curriculum design, and short-term training. The proposals, in both cases, also underlined the shortage of academic staff and resources in the local partners, which the partnerships are supposed to address. Hence, the partnership initiation and formation in both cases seem to have demonstrated a practice, somewhat, different from the traditional partnerships which are often initiated externally by the Northern partners (Ishengoma, 2016).

In both cases, NORAD did not directly participate in the construction and execution of the partnerships. Yet, the two case studies show that the partnership building was also in consideration of NORAD's requirements and procedures, which contributed to shaping partners' roles in setting agendas, goals, and activities, and in sharing roles and responsibilities. As a funding body, NORAD invited interested Southern and Norwegian universities to establish partnerships and apply for funding awards. The selection of proposals was, undeniably, linked to NORAD's criteria, such as relevance to NORAD's objectives and thematic areas, local institution's needs and capacity, gender inclusiveness and equity, sustainability, and cost-effectiveness (Norad, n.d. pp. 10-11, 17). Participants from both UA and UB viewed most of these criteria as worthwhile in entertaining local priorities and balancing partners' roles while considering some others as sponsor stipulations that tend to distort local priorities. They raised concerns that NORAD's focus on gender equity has influenced the local partners to include the recruitment of 50% female PhD candidates as part of the partnership project. For example, UB30 emphasized that although the gender issue was in line with their institutional needs, this recruitment procedure did not conform with the existing context, as female academics with MA degrees were scarce "*let alone those who were suitable for PhD candidate*." The inclusion of female recruitment in the UA-NU partnership was also described as linked to the local partner's desire to win the grant.

Although the foreign partner encourages you to design a project that meets your priorities, you also need to consider the funding body's priorities to compete for and win the funding. Or else you may lose competition (UA7).

As gender equity, particularly in academic positions, is a salient problem in many African HEIs, including Ethiopia (Kassie, 2018; Teferra et al., 2018), it is commendable that NORAD's requirements and incentives have positively influenced the Southern partners (UA & UB) to implement such female recruitment procedures. However, this practice is limited to NORAD-supported projects. According to the interviews, if the local partners truly valued this recruitment procedure, it would have been implemented across all programs. Instead, it remained as a slack appendage to specific partnerships solely to access NORAD's funding, without bringing about substantial institutional reforms. Although the Norwegians granted the local partners autonomy in identifying their needs, the local partners were well aware of Norway's strong emphasis on gender equity and felt compelled to prioritize it over their own urgent needs and priorities. This reflects the influence of conditionality-attached funding in shaping partnership agendas (Andriansen & Madsen, 2019; Ishengoma, 2016).

The two cases also revealed that the allocation of responsibilities between partners was determined through discussions and agreements, taking into account qualifications and experiences. For example, UB25 stated, "*All arrangements and decisions are based on mutual agreements*." Yet,

the agreement was based on the assumption that the local staff would take on leading roles in tasks they were capable of, while the foreign staff would take the lead in tasks beyond the capabilities of the [local partner] (UA5). As a result, partners in both cases assumed joint and individual responsibilities, as summarized in Appendix A. Accordingly, the allegedly more experienced NU staff, for the most part, was assigned to play mentoring and supporting roles, empowering the local staff through knowledge-sharing, capacity-building training, and providing access to educational resources. On the other hand, the local partners' comparatively lower qualifications and experience positioned them as in need of their Norwegian partners' assistance. Participants unanimously expressed their lack of academic and research capacity and experience as the primary reason for engaging in the partnerships. For example, UA9 stated, "*... [the Norwegian partners] are far more advanced than us, and we need to learn from them... adopt their work*." Hence, it appears that the apparent difference in qualifications and experience has continued to shape the positioning of partners and has posed challenges to achieving equity in the distribution of roles and responsibilities (Andriansen & Madsen, 2019; Menashy, 2018).

Although the two cases shared many similarities, they also revealed differences in the balance of the distribution of roles and responsibilities between partners. The UA-NU partnership, compared to the UB-NU partnership, exhibited a more balanced distribution of roles. This can be attributed to variations in partnership modalities and activities employed (see Appendix B). In the UA-NU partnership, the main activities included PhD training, joint research, community engagement, short-term training, and MA curriculum design. The PhD program was hosted by the local partner (UA), where professors from both UA and NU collaborated in teaching courses and providing supervision. UA members, like their NU colleagues, were assigned to be involved in all other partnership activities. On the other hand, the primary activities in the UB-NU partnership were "sandwich" PhD and MPhil programs, short-term training, and MPhil curriculum design. The sandwich model offered scholarships to UB students for studying at both NU and UB. Consequently, NU was responsible for running the PhD program, including admissions, degree awards, course offerings, and supervision. This was due to the lack of UB staff with the necessary qualifications to run PhD training (UB26). Furthermore, unlike the UA-NU partnership, no joint-research in the UB-NU partnership could "… *involve local faculty members and contribute to research capacity-building [at UB]*" (UB21). As a result, UB members had limited participation compared to their NU counterparts, indicating an asymmetric distribution of roles.

The study further showed that the development of the UA-NU partnership followed a bottom-up path. The partnership was formed and operated at the departmental level (operating academic unit), where members were actively "*involved in the partnership establishment*" from initiation through design to implementation (UA6). On the other hand, the UB-NU partnership appeared to follow a top-down approach, with the selection and design of partnership activities taking place at the college level. The involvement of operating units, such as departments, in certain partnership activities was minimal. Participants, including an administrator (UB21), often claimed that the UB-NU partnership was conceptualized and designed at the college level by the respective heads "*without the active participation of department members*". This resulted in a relatively lower role and level of involvement of operating members at UB in the planning process compared to UA. Given that the focus of the partnership is capacity building of the local partner, the limited participation of local partner members may hinder knowledge transfer and undermine capacity-building efforts (Andriansen & Madsen, 2019; Ishengoma, 2016).

How are the Partnerships Functioning?

The two case studies have indicated that the success of the operation process largely depends on the initial partnership conceptualization and building stage. An interesting example is the MPhil program, which was proposed "*without sufficient involvement and agreement from the [operating] department"* (UB30), and has remained impractical (UB-NU Progress report, p.7). The interview also

revealed a disagreement between the academics and the coordinator regarding the relevance of this program. While the coordinator emphasized its relevance for addressing research gaps arguing that "it is research-driven", the academics argued that joint research would have been preferable to the MPhil program for enhancing research skills and experience. Such partnerships that lack common understanding among members regarding detailed contents and activities tend to be unsuccessful (Sutton & Obst, 2011).

A subtle distinction was observed between the two cases regarding the roles played by the local partners in recruiting PhD candidates. In the UA-NU partnership, the recruitment of PhD students was "*primarily, carried out by [UA]*" (UA4). On the other hand, in the UB-NU partnership, although UB participated in the recruitment process, candidates were "*scrutinized as per NU's admission criteria*" (UB25). Consequently, the UA-NU partnership seems to have granted the local partner a more significant role, thereby promoting local ownership. Conversely, the selection and admission criteria employed by the foreign partners in the UB-NU partnership are perceived as upholding international standards.

Regarding financial administration, the two cases reflect a departure from the traditional North-South partnership, where control over project finances typically rests with the Northern partner (Ishengoma, 2016; Teferra, 2014). Instead, the partnerships exhibited a slightly different practice that involved local actors in financial administration and management. As stated in the partnership agreements, NORAD disburses funds to the partners based on agreed-upon financial needs, upon request by the recipient (local partner). The recipient assumes "administrative responsibilities for allocating its share, accounting for the funds, and reporting transactions to NORAD" (UB-NU Partnership Agreement, p.2). This approach was recognized and appreciated by participants (e.g., UA14 and UB24) as it introduced a certain level of equity in fund distribution and control. Additionally, participants highlighted the flexibility in budget allocation by NORAD when necessary (UA6). For instance, both partnerships were able to extend their funding periods by two years to complete delayed activities. However, the issue of financial administration and control remained a subject of debate. One administrator argued that while NU is not delegated as a gatekeeper of the project finance, "*it is still under the control of NORAD*" (UA1). An academic staff member added, "*Your expenditure needs to be in the budget line, and you need to report to NORAD*" (UB22). On one hand, this reflects a greater level of budget control by the funding body, which can place the local partners in a dependent position (Alemu, 2019). On the other hand, such practices can be seen as promoting transparency and accountability in budget utilization.

The study also revealed unbalanced fund distribution, favoring the foreign partner. According to the UB-NU and UA-NU agreements, the foreign partner retained 79% of the partnership budget for UB-NU and 63% for UA-NU. This disparity in fund allocation between the two cases may be due to the major activities of the UB-NU partnership being overseen by NU staff, whose compensation was costly, and the absence of joint research that could have brought more budgets to the local partner.

The study also shed light on the challenges and tensions associated with financial administration. Some of these were attributable to internal issues within the local institutions, such as undue bureaucracy and weak financial management, which "*resulted in procurement delays*" (UB35). This aligns with the rigid procurement systems observed in Ethiopian universities (Teferra et al., 2018). Other challenges arose from inconsistencies in practices and systems between the local institutions and NORAD's requirements. For instance, the auditing, financial transaction, and reporting systems mandated by NORAD were deemed difficult to integrate into the local contexts, leading to delays in disbursements (UA11, UB28).

Another important point highlighted in both cases was the key role of academics in establishing and leveraging the partnership, as observed in previous studies (Bordogna, 2017; Gieser, 2016). It was observed that coordinators shouldered the majority of responsibilities within the partnership and played a key role in negotiations, design, and decision-making. One administrator underscored the [UB] coordinator's "*lack of commitment and leadership skills*" (UB2) as contributing to the failure of the MPhil program and other limitations within the UB-NU partnership. It appears that

the relationship in the partnership and its success depended much on the individual personalities and leadership qualities.

The interview further revealed that several academics (e.g., UB27, UB29, UB33, UA10, UA12, UA8) do not view their Norwegian colleagues as 'partners' working towards mutual benefits, but rather as 'supporters'. Nonetheless, they still regard the relationship as generally positive and conducive to enhancing the capacity building of the local partners. To quote one of the academics' comments: "*The [NU] members are assisting us to achieve our capacity development goals*" (UA8). It appears that the partnerships are viewed as acts of benevolence aimed at assisting the allegedly low-profiled Southern partners, rather than as opportunities for mutual benefits (Koehn & Obamba, 2014).

The partnership projects were subject to monitoring and evaluation on both a formative and summative basis. These practices were deemed valuable for identifying gaps, obtaining feedback, and making necessary adjustments. The formative monitoring and evaluation practices were generally perceived as inclusive for both parties. However, asymmetrical tendencies were reported, with summative evaluations being "*conducted by an evaluation team representing NORAD*" (UA3), while the involvement of local partners was limited to providing data and comments on the evaluation results. Participants further asserted that the evaluation and progress reporting were based on performance indicators and report templates predominantly designed by NORAD.

> *What contents to be evaluated and in what formats to be reported are already indicated in the template provided by NORAD. It is based on this template that we prepare the progress reports (UB24).*

A review of the progress reports revealed a notable emphasis on the partnership outcomes and benefits for the local partners while overlooking those pertaining to the foreign partner. Indicators or anticipated benefits for the Norwegian partners appeared to fall outside the scope of the monitoring and evaluation process. This disregard for considering the "costs and benefits to Northern higher education partners..." reflects asymmetry in the evaluation framework (Koehn & Uitto, 2015, p.4).

Discussions

This study aims to examine and map the patterns of North-South Higher Education Partnership (HEP) development, focusing on the experiences and positioning of local partners. By comparing two cases, the study seeks to gain a better understanding of the nuances and draw lessons that can foster mutuality.

Overall, the study reveals both aspects of mutuality, such as equity, participation, autonomy, and solidarity, as well as challenges counteracting its realization, with variations between the two cases. Regarding equity, NORAD advocates for a North-South HEP that promotes mutuality and equity. The Norwegian partners emphasized reducing power differentials by involving local partners in the initiation, planning, and decision-making processes. Although the extent of involvement varied across the cases, the local partners played a role in shaping partnership agendas, setting objectives, and sharing roles and responsibilities. This inclusion of Southern inputs signifies the incorporation of equity in the partnership programs. Importantly, participants highlighted that major partnership arrangements and practices were based on discussions and mutual agreements between partners, aligning with the notion of equity (Hayhoe, 1986; Leng, 2016).

Another aspect of equity acknowledged by academics was being credited as the first authors and editors in joint publications. This differs from common practices in North-South research partnerships where Southern scholars often assume roles as assistants or local facilitators (Jamil & Haque, 2017; Halvorsen, 2017).

However, the study also reveals challenges that relegate local partners to a subordinate position. While goals and activities were agreed upon through mutual agreements, the focus persisted on

the capacity building of the local partners. Such partnerships often emphasize supporting Southern partners by the Northern partners (Andriansen & Madsen, 2019). This unbalanced perceived benefit positions the local partners as the primary beneficiaries of the partnership. Participants mentioned various benefits that the partnership brought to the local partners, such as academic and research capacity growth, funding, and new international linkages. Evaluation practices were also limited to assessing the results and benefits achieved by the local partners. Yet, as participants commented, the partnerships were also beneficial to the Norwegian partners, to the least in terms of exposure to the Southern academic environment (e.g., Teferra, 2014). These factors reflect an inequitable positioning that undermines the contribution of the local partners and the partnership with the Northern partners (Koehn & Uitto, 2015; Luthuli et al, 2024).

Furthermore, some of NORAD's requirements were noted to undermine the negotiating power of the local partners, challenging equity between partners. Notably, NORAD's funding was linked to gender mainstreaming, which sometimes compromised the local partners' priorities. Such involvement of the funding agency in North-South partnerships often poses equity challenges (Menashy, 2018).

In terms of participation, the active involvement of partner members from the initiation and planning stage is argued to garner their buy-in and maintain the partnerships on track, while their exclusion erodes their sense of ownership and hampers partnership functioning (Helms, 2015). This study reveals that members from the local partners have been involved in partnership development to varying degrees across the cases. For example, PhD students (in both cases) and faculty members (in UA) have published joint research in international journals. This contribution of the local partners to knowledge production reflects the tenet of participation in mutuality (Hayhoe, 1986). However, due to differences in partnership modalities, paths, activities, and capacities of the local partners, the UA-NU partnership exhibited a slightly higher degree of local partner participation compared to the UB-NU partnership.

The UA-NU partnership, following a bottom-up establishment approach, provided more opportunities for active engagement in partnership development for operating members compared to the UB-NU partnership, which followed a top-down approach. In the UA-NU partnership, members from both parties participated in the initial meetings, proposing project ideas, planning, and implementation. On the other hand, the involvement of local partners in the UB-NU partnership was relatively limited. The major activities of the UB-NU "sandwich" program were primarily conducted by the Norwegians, with minimal participation from the UB side due to a lack of qualified staff. In contrast, the UA-NU "at-home" partnership involved both parties. UA's relatively stronger staff capacity in managing PhD training positioned them to play a more substantial role and participate actively in the partnership. The presence of joint research in the UA-NU partnership also facilitated the involvement of more local academics. As such, research-driven activities were perceived as more conducive to increasing the participation level of local academics at various qualification levels. Thus, compared to the UA-NU partnership, the UB-NU partnership exhibited more asymmetry.

Autonomy emphasizes mutual respect for contributions and needs (Hayhoe, 1986). In this study, local academics and students highly appreciated the respect and autonomy given to them by their Norwegian colleagues and advisors during their collaboration. The local partners were encouraged to propose partnership projects that held local relevance, highlighting a commitment to autonomy. However, the study also reveals a perception that the Norwegian partners, while not seeking a dominant position, were regarded as a source of knowledge and expertise within the partnerships (Mwangi, 2017). They were seen as more experienced deserving the role of mentors and patrons to the local partners. In contrast, the local partners were viewed as lacking in such expertise, often relegated to facilitating and providing information on the local environment and context. Consequently, while members of the local partners exhibited a strong desire to learn and gain knowledge and academic experience from their Norwegian counterparts, the Norwegians appeared to show less interest in acquiring knowledge from the local partners. This dynamic reinforces a

unidirectional transfer of knowledge from North to South, which poses challenges to ensuring the mutuality tenet of autonomy (Jooste, 2015; Mwangi, 2017).

The study also uncovered practices that disadvantage the local norms and practices. Specifically, it was observed that local partners were expected to adhere to NORAD-driven accounting and reporting systems, procedures, and performance indicators, with limited input from the local partners. This practice runs counter to autonomy, which necessitates the consideration of the working cultures and norms of the local partners (Leng, 2016).

The two cases also demonstrated varying degrees of solidarity in terms of strengthening interconnections and providing support to the partnerships. Both partnerships established linkages with other international projects, allowing for collaborative training, workshops, conferences, and additional resource support. Additionally, the local partners in both cases were able to form new partnerships with other local institutions, showcasing aspects of solidarity (Leng, 2016).

However, the UA-NU partnership displayed a stronger degree of interpersonal relationships and community engagement compared to the UB-NU partnership. Involvement in joint research and co-advising was valued in fostering solidarity within the UA-NU partnership. The UA-NU partnership's community engagement activities were also praised for strengthening interconnections with the local community. In contrast, the UB academics' engagement is limited to relatively fewer activities in the UB-NU partnership compared to the UA-NU partnership. Consequently, the degree of interaction between partner members in the UB-NU partnership seems more constrained. It appears that these differences in the nature of partnership activities account for variations in degrees of solidarity observed between the two partnerships (Mwangi, 2017)

Conclusions and Implications

In the context of North-South relations, power asymmetry—an imbalance of power, resources, and influence between parties, rooted in broader contextual factors—is often unavoidable (Andriansen & Madsen, 2019). Consequently, it can be argued that power dynamics would shape the relationships between the Norwegian and Ethiopian HEIs. Nonetheless, despite this reality, the context gives ground for the relationship dynamics. Therefore, this study emphasizes the importance of recognizing the inherent power differentials and offers insights into how these partnerships can transcend asymmetry and move towards mutuality.

The two case studies have demonstrated various structural factors that constrained the role and participation of the Southern partners, albeit to different degrees. For instance, the scarcity of local resources led to the dependence on external funding, which often resulted in the selection of Northern partners. Additionally, differences in academic and research capacity played a role in shaping the partnership objectives towards capacity building for the Southern partners. These capacity differences also contributed to imbalances in roles and financial distributions, favoring the Northern partners. The study further revealed the influence of the funding body's interests in shaping partnership agendas. Undoubtedly, power structures are entrenched in such partnerships and may continue to be obstacles to achieving mutuality.

However, even in such circumstances, partners can navigate pathways that somewhat counterbalance the asymmetries and foster a less patronizing relationship. For example, the Norwegian partners have attempted to ensure that they do not dominate the local partners by providing them with a participatory role. By recognizing power differentials and seeking ways to mitigate them, partners demonstrate promising signs of promoting equity, participation, autonomy, and solidarity, thereby transcending asymmetry. One of the partnerships exhibited a stronger degree of mutuality, which can be attributed to differences in the partnership arrangements that consider context-sensitive variables such as partnership modalities, pathways, activities, and individuals involved. This indicates that partners can make context-sensitive and practical adjustments in partnership arrangements to enhance the participatory role of the Southern partners.

This study demonstrates that the "at-home" partnership modality promotes the participation and ownership of the Southern partner, compared to the "sandwich" modality that involves scholarship abroad. While the academic qualifications Southern academics acquire through the "sandwich" scholarship are valuable in raising academic standards and social recognition, it would be overly simplistic to assume that the so-called "international standard" is always relevant and aligned with local needs (Mamdani, 2017). In this context, the "at-home" modality is commendable as it not only provides students with international experience while staying at home but also facilitates knowledge production within the South that responds to local needs.

The study reveals that partnerships can be formed through agreements between higher officials or through the initiative of faculties and academic units. Regardless of whether the partnership follows a top-down or bottom-up pathway, what matters most is how well the partnership arrangement and activity decisions are grounded in the academic unit and involve its academics, who are the key actors in the actual interaction. For instance, in one of the case studies, a partnership activity (MPhil) that was initiated and conceptualized from the top, with little input from the academic unit, ultimately proved unsuccessful. This highlights the need for a balanced approach that incorporates both top-down and bottom-up elements in partnership arrangements.

The individual involved in the partnership is another context-sensitive variable that has been found to have the potential to either address or reinforce the effects of structural obstacles. The presence of personal links and dedicated coordinators played a crucial role in establishing and advancing the partnerships. It is also important to note that differences in the diversity and types of partnership activities resulted in variations in the level of participation of the Southern partners, which should be taken into account when forming partnerships.

In conclusion, power relations persist in North-South HEPs, often placing Southern partners in a disadvantageous position. However, inequalities in resources and capacity can also serve as a basis for complementarity and collaboration, provided that partners recognize these imbalances and work together to mitigate their problematic consequences. Promisingly, this study identifies paths to achieving mutuality. Certain contextual and practical arrangements have enabled partnerships to function well within the inherent power relations and transcend them. Thus, this study points to the need for international partnership policy and practices to:

a. Emphasize recognizing the sources of asymmetry between partners and developing strategies to reduce their negative effects, to foster more mutual partnerships.
b. Prioritize context-sensitive partnership activities and models, such as the "at-home" approach, which can promote local partner engagement and responsiveness, when designing partnership structures.
c. Balancing top-down and bottom-up approaches, incorporating both high-level institutional agreements and grassroots, faculty-driven initiatives, to ensure partnerships are well-grounded.
d. Empower individuals in the partnership, as their role and interpersonal dynamics are crucial for navigating and surpassing partnership challenges.

Moreover, as this study focused primarily on the experiences and perspectives of the local partners in international HEPs, the findings may be limited in scope. This suggests the need for further studies that include the views of the Northern partners that may provide additional insights.

Notes:

[1] This study is extracted from the author's unpublished PhD dissertation, with a significant addition and update of data.
[2] Disclosure statement: No potential conflict of interest was reported by the author

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Appendix A. Overview of the Two Partnership Programs

	UA-NU partnership	UB-NU partnership
Funding source	NORAD	
Main purpose	Capacity building of the local partner	
Duration	Six years (from late 2013-2020)	
Previous linkage	Institutional and personal linkages	Personal linkage
Main partnership activities	PhD training, joint-research, short-term training, community engagement, MA curriculum design	PhD and MPhil (Masters of Philosophy) training, short-term training, MPhil curriculum design
Modality	- 'At-home'—the partnership is, hosted in UA, with students' study visits in NU. - Involves both UA and NU academics - UA offers the degree	- 'Sandwich'—PhD and MPhil training is hosted in both institutions. - NU offers scholarships to PhD and MPhil students. - NU offers the PhD degree.
Pathways of development	More of bottom-up—formed at the department level with ratification at the university level.	More of top-down—formed at the college level and tried to engage departments.
Progresses until end of 2020	- Of 14 PhD students, 7 of them have completed their studies; - Three peer-reviewed books and 29 articles and book chapters were published; - Language resources (e.g., 2 dictionaries, 8 speech corpora, 5 web-archived corpora) were developed for some languages. - MA Curriculum for Sign Language was designed. - Training on linguistic was offered to many local community members. - Two new partnerships were created.	- Of 12 PhD students, 03 of them have completed their studies; - 15 MPhil students have completed elective courses at NU; - 17 articles were published by PhD students - Various short-term training and workshops that benefited UB's staff and students were offered. - New partnerships were created with one local and two foreign partners that brought additional joint-research opportunities and supports.

Appendix B. Summary of Partners' Roles and Responsibilities

UA-NU Partnership			UB-NU Partnership		
Joint assignments	**UA's responsibilities**	**NU's responsibilities**	**Joint assignments**	**UA's responsibilities**	**NU's responsibilities**
developing proposal, designing MA curriculum offer courses co-supervise PhD students conduct joint-research engage in community service activities	host the project manage the project facilitate networking with local community	assisting UA in managing, and coordinating and implementing the project empowering and supporting NU staff through experience sharing and capacity building training providing access to laboratory assisting UA in developing language technology	developing proposal, scheduling, budgeting, recruit PhD and MPhil students from UB develop MPhil curriculum host and offer courses to MPhil students	managing and monitoring the project reporting progresses in consultation with NU offer courses to MPhil students when they come back home	provide support to UB, share experience, offer short-term training to UB staff, mentor BU academics and students host, offer course, and supervise PhD students host, offer course to MPhil students provide educational material access to UB staff and students

Note: Summarized from interviews and review of documents