

CHAPTER FOUR: THE EMERGENCY OF PARTNERSHIPS IN HIGHER EDUCATION IN SOUTH AFRICA

4.0 Introduction

This chapter is an attempt to draw our attention to the emergency of partnerships in education and the potential they have in strengthening capacities and maximizing the investments that are needed to ensure that higher education programmes are sustainable in political, technical managerial and humanitarian terms. It assesses the impact and the potential of partnerships in higher education by examining its implications to research training. It is argued that partnerships have the potential to improve the quality of research through the maximization of others' expertise. For instance, this chapter argues that partnerships in higher education are a result of shrinking budgets and therefore the intervention of donors, as African governments are faced with significant pressures for socio-economic development. Contextual issues such as shrinking budgets; and the changing role of donors etc which are discussed briefly here are important drivers behind the rise of partnerships.

4.1 Changes in HE including Shrinking Budgets

Reliance on revenue generated through tuition and fees is fast becoming the norm. The financial crisis in higher education in South Africa of the past several years, slashed state appropriations for public institutions and led directly to steep tuition increases, but it only exacerbated a trend that had been building for decades. The burden of funding higher education has shifted increasingly from state governments to students (and their parents) as the share of university budgets funded by state appropriations has declined steadily in most universities. If these budget difficulties were simply part of the recurring boom-and-bust cycle of financing, the solution would be to hunker down and wait out the bust (Smith 2004: 79-83). But as the voices cited above suggest, there are greater implications. The growing demand for university education among the children of the baby-boom generation, who are now graduating from high schools, comes on top of the increase in

non-traditional students seeking higher education to compete in an economy that depends heavily on technological and intellectual skills (AAUP, 2004: online)

Short-term solutions that rely on an exploited class of contingent and under-supported faculty who teach pre-packaged educational materials will not provide the kind of HE that political leaders are demanding. The purpose of HE is to develop an ability to think critically and to evaluate ideas as citizens. In a speech in New York City last April,(2004) Donald Langenberg, former chancellor of the University of Maryland system, contrasted the commitment of most states to HE in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries to the lack of political will to fund it today. At that time the public looked on the state university as a treasure, even though only a privileged few actually attended college. Today, as HE in South Africa, comes within the reach of almost everyone, states are devaluing their systems and relying much more on individual funding for tuition and fees.

Shrinking budgets in South African HE are a major threat to the natural progress of research throughout the world (UNISA Research Report (2001). This country is seeing transformation in HE, and the introduction of survival strategies. Byrne (1996) argues that valuable time is spent on meetings in an attempt to save higher learning institutions, yet this time should be used for research and teaching. On the other hand, the World Bank report of 1995 suggests that, “Enrolments have risen sharply, many new universities have been created, and proportions of expatriate teaching staff have declined in response to the increase in national graduates.” This, according to the report has resulted in the severe decrease in funding for universities in Africa as the continent’s economy is seen to be stagnant (World bank, 2005/04/06: online). Carnoy has explored the ideological side of globalization brings, and argues that it has increased the pressure to reduce growth of public spending on education. HE budgets, generally have suffered from shrinking and diminishing budgets, as they struggle to keep up with the costs of such a noble cause.

4.2 The role of donors

Research points to inadequate funding in African HE, where governments are faced with significant pressures for socio-economic development, in a bid to come up with solutions, that will provide adequate funding for their universities. Due to the fact that most African universities have been dependent on the state for their funding, the current levels are unlikely to change (World Bank Report, 1996). Donors are therefore trying to close the gap that has been created by the diminishing

funding for HE, and donor funding is one way in which the situation can be improved. For instance, the Spencer Funding for the development of research training supports the CSAU through availing funds for full-time and part-time students to pursue the doctoral programme offered by the Consortium. Scholars such as Gibbons (1994) argue that through the effects of globalization, HE can no longer afford 'academic insularity'. Instead, it should embark on partnership ventures with a range of stakeholders. This would help bridge the gap between university research and the marketplace. Hence, they point to research in partnerships as being shaped in the context of application, and making it necessary for all interested parties to enter into dialogue in order to improve research capacity in HE. The doctoral programme of the Consortium, which is funded by the Spencer Foundation, has its main goal as the promotion of research in HE in South African universities.

4.3 The emergence of partnerships in HE

There are important drivers behind the rise of partnerships, such as: (i) shrinking budgets; (ii) the changing role of donors; (iii) the North and South Relations and National and Regional Partnerships. These come in many forms in HE and have far-reaching results, for instance, the CSAU which came about as a result of a widely recognized shortage of a high-level capacity especially in the area of Education Policy research (Cross, 1999:2). Cross stresses that higher learning institutions have since realized that their existing programmes could be improved through partnerships and collaboration. In light of this, higher learning institutions come together to combine their strengths for the utmost purpose of improving their existing curriculum and structures for research training. This view was also presented by Gibbons et al. (1994), who advocated that partnerships are a result of globalization.

With the intensification of international competition in business and industry, South African HE has had to acquire organizational abilities that enable the country to maintain competitive advantages in an unpredictable market environment. The most outstanding feature of this was collaboration, especially through mergers and alliances with other knowledge-suppliers. Partnerships help improve peer support and networks, equity and responsiveness, number of higher degrees completed, including attrition and completion rates, and the shift from isolationism within HE institutions to research collaboration.

Partnership in the education sector plays an important role, as it implies more active and committed involvement by those involved. The emerging concepts of partnerships within the framework of HE, and the changing role of the state, mean that partners share responsibility for a joint activity. As governments are decentralizing responsibility for education, there is a strong need for innovative partners who can raise funds for their institutions.

Amongst the lessons to be learned from partnerships theory and literature arising from this project are that partners share experiences and expertise, provide mutual support to achieve goals, concentrate on what each partner knows best and the availability of resources increases. Working together on a given task gives more of a sense of ownership than if the task were done by someone else. Finally, partners tend to complement each others' efforts in assessment of programmes.

4.4 Strengthening the North and South relations

In recent years, there have been many discussions about strengthening the research capability of universities in developing countries, especially those in Africa. This, according to Chandiwana (2002), began around the mid-1990s, when the Council on Health Research for Development and the Global Forum for Health Research were established. Moreover, he argues that the starting point for African researchers is to agree that, due to the severe resource constraints, this continent has continued to lag behind in scientific research which would otherwise have seen it contributing meaningfully to social and economic development. This is said to have begun with the launching of the new Partnership for Africa Development (NEPAD), which poses new challenges for African

researchers to increase their productivity. This could be done by building the North-South Partnerships with colleagues working at the G8 research institutions, with the benefits of their scientific and financial resources.

Historically, however, models of such a nature become sporadic and are not always well- detailed for those wishing to engage in such North-South collaboration, and it can be argued that as such collaborations are driven by the Northern Partner this does not auger well for Africa. Hence, in a bid to develop more young researchers, the Universities in South Africa have seen it fit to engage in partnerships that are developing such collaboration.

There are major discrepancies between the North and the South when it comes to access into HE. For instance, a small percentage of women have access to HE in the South, as compared to the North. Gender is a vital issue in building and developing postgraduate research. Women are usually disproportionately disadvantaged in the field of Educational Research and ICT. In general, the use of the internet in Africa is limited and costly to the general student. Most funds, ideas and innovations for HE research training, come from organizations from the North in a bid to empower the South. The Spencer grants, which are used for fellowships for full-time and part-time students in South Africa, especially in the CSAU, have helped bring changes within the South African research programmes. Drawing from the report of the Research Training Grant (RTG) meeting in Arizona of 2003, schools of education were not doing enough in teacher training. The US Department of Education stated that, ‘the only means of establishing “scientific” evidence of “what works” is to promote social “science” to inform policy-making (RTG Meeting, Arizona, 2003). Moreover, it is apparent that HE partnerships exhibit the prevalence of the colonial pattern which privileges the North-South partnerships, and these need immediate attention to co-ordinate and strengthen existing partnerships and collaborative activities in Africa and the SADC region, so as to promote and utilize opportunities that may arise for the benefit of HE.

4.5 National and regional partnerships

This study argues collaboration may be useful in helping HE to provide quality education that is envisaged by all. National and regional partnerships have been lobbying for national governments to regulate HE according to national needs and priorities. It further points out that HE should encourage multiple forms of internationalization that may yield mutual benefits to the co-operating partners in other countries and regions (GATS, 2004). In regard to HE's research function; the emerging knowledge society could offer opportunities to the institutions of higher learning. In most

cases, when private businesses downsize fundamental research efforts, they look to universities to fill that gap. Higher learning institutions can become potential partners for knowledge, especially in times where public subsidies for research and development are diminishing. Of note here is that public-private partnerships, networks and alliances are already being established, of which the CSAU is one. Gibbons et al. (1994) analysed the changes taking place within the research domain and noted that the organizational structure of universities should not discourage the formation of such useful partnerships.

The programme of the CSAU has had a regional, national and institutional impact on existing approaches to postgraduate research training. At the regional level, it has been regarded not only as an effective approach to human resource training, suited to the needs of the region, but also as a model of training likely to change the North-South Knowledge relations and minimize dependence on the North in HE training (Report for The Consortium, 2003). In this regard, the South Africa/Norway Tertiary Education Development (SANTED) project, coordinated by the Ministry of Education, is considering supporting a similar initiative at the regional level, with the participation of the Wits. At the national level, the strengths of the Consortium's initiative have been the interaction between various institutions; faculty and students, together with the academic staff to comprehend and view research from broader base, informed by international exchange of ideas and challenges (Cross, 2003:6).

4.6 Associations

Associations of universities have been formed to facilitate research capacity in higher learning institutions in Africa. This emphasizes the need of universities to pool their resources in a bid to build capacity among member institutions, especially on research, and with the help of donor funding. These associations have developed the scarce resources and acquired expertise in transforming HE from its traditional outlook. Some of these International Educational Bodies include the Council on American NE, CHEPS (Netherlands), the Association of Commonwealth Universities, UNESCO, and the International Association of Universities. An example is the Consortium of Open learning Institutions of South Africa (COLISA), a confederal body of the three distance education institutions: University of South Africa (UNISA), Vista University and Technikon South Africa, founded in 1996. They have agreed to pool their resources to address the massification of HE and collaborate in the development of course materials in order to provide for more efficient and cost effective distance education, by utilizing advanced technology in the delivery of course materials. It is governed by a Board with representatives from each of the institutions, administered through an Executive Director, and is financed through subscriptions by members.

4.6.1 Education Policy Unit

The Education Policy Unit (EPU) was established in 1987, as a joint project of Wits and the National Education Coordinating Committee (NECC), in order to provide a relatively protected base for research activity in the struggle for a democratic education (Wits EPU, 2005::ii). This unit has since become a high quality research unit dedicated to critical research, policy analysis, capacity building and advocacy in support of democratic and equitable transformation of the South African education and training sector. It therefore has a dual identity, in that it is equally committed to academic excellence and social justice in education (ibid).

The EPU's closest partner in has been Wits Education faculty and its predecessors, using resources and expertise that enrich each other. There is a long history of exchange through joint seminars, hosting visiting academics, participation in joint projects and planning, designing and offering courses in education policy and planning at the undergraduate and postgraduate levels. This Unit is located

within the School's Policy, Planning and Management (PPM) Division and has supported the University's aims and objectives by building a research-active community of education policy researchers.

Its key achievement has been, and continues to be, the strengthening partnerships with government at the highest level. The EPU has produced a number of key papers in collaboration with senior Department of Education (DoE) officials for the then minister Mr. Kader Asmal. This Unit has been a forerunner in national debates, and has convened important public seminars with the School of Education. Together, they have created forums for education officials, academics and research NGOs and practitioners to debate key issues such as curriculum reform, education financing and school governance. The Unit has paid attention to improving the capacity of its staff in particular fulfilling the University's mandate of broadening the research base and correcting the race and gender imbalances. This is the view and mandate of the Consortium. All research staff members are engaged in higher degree study, including post-doctoral research.

Over the past five years, the Wits EPU has been involved in a number of large scale research projects, often in collaboration with local and international partners. It has an extensive network of friends and colleagues who helped in promoting comparative research, provided opportunities for funding and opened up routes for publication and disseminating research.

4.6.2 The Human Sciences Research Council

The Human Sciences Research Council (HSRC) is South Africa's statutory research agency dedicated to the applied social sciences. The HSRC is concerned with all aspects of development and poverty alleviation in South Africa, the region and in Africa. The Policy Unit serves as a 'think tank' and a forum for the deliberation and analysis of public policy on the most critical issues affecting the lives of ordinary people in Africa, such as homelessness, unemployment, poverty, crime, access to quality education and health services (Policy Unit, 2005).

The quest for the improvement of education quality, it has been argued, is the most critical challenge facing most developed and developing nations. The 2000 World Conference on Education for All in Dakar concluded that good quality education is essential for supporting economic development and addressing poverty, equipping learners with requisite skills and knowledge, supporting people to transform their lives and the society in which they live, and to achieve the Millennium Development Goals. In South Africa, Education Minister Naledi Pandor also noted that “Improving the quality of education in South Africa is a national priority that requires involvement and engagement throughout all levels of our society” (HSRC Report, 2004:2). To address this challenge, a national initiative for Education Quality Improvement has been established at the HSRC to support the Government and other key role players in enhancing evidence-based decision making that could contribute to improving educational quality, with specific emphasis on difficult delivery contexts. This is a three-year initiative which focuses on the primary determinants of education quality, namely, the quality of learning and teaching practices.

The primary objectives of this initiative are to:

- Consolidate and disseminate relevant research findings with specific emphasis on identifying best practices and what works in difficult delivery contexts,
- Engage in high level policy dialogue to obtain consensus from key decision makers on how to address issues identified, and
- Identify evidence-based strategies and provide relevant and practical policy options for improving, the quality of education.

In this initiative, a systems approach will be applied that recognizes the inextricable links between the technical, cultural and political factors that determine the effectiveness of programmes and policies to improve the quality of education. In particular, this initiative focuses on knowledge generation and use, decision-making processes and systems and Development of relevant indicators.

It is argued that the Unit conducts systematic evaluation of policies and suggests alternative means of achieving social goals. It also analyses existing or prospective policies with the intention of suggesting to decision-makers alternative ways of improving a population's social welfare. This has prompted researchers such as (Hendricks, 2004:2) to write that this unit serves as a 'think tank' for research in South Africa and the African continent as a whole. He goes on to say that such an organization serves as a research organization that focuses on political, socio-economic, international and development issues in present day Africa. On the other hand, the Consortium has the potential to serve as a program that is aimed at developing research training in higher education through collaboration and partnerships.

4.6.3 National Research Foundation

The National Research Foundation Act, No23 of 1998 worked together with the Centre for Science Development (CSD) and the Foundation for Research Development (FRD) to establish the National Research Foundation (NRF), a new organization that was begun on the 1st of April 1999. Its objective is to support and promote research through funding, human resource development and the provision of the necessary research facilities, in order to facilitate the creation of knowledge, innovation and development in all fields of science and technology, and thereby contribute to the improvement of the quality of life for all South Africans (Nhlapo, 2006:4).

The NRF aims to address the current challenges faced by South African institutions of higher learning in research through partnerships. This is to help these institutions to reach the level of world class universities and by so doing they would contribute to their mandate of knowledge generation and human capital development (ibid). This is a direct response to the educational policies of the apartheid regime which culminated to the underdevelopment of research capacities at previously disadvantaged institutions such as Historically Black Universities (HBUs). The Foundation for Research Development began the pilot phase of the Research Development Programme (RDP) in 1988. Its purpose was to create a research

support framework for HBU staff members who did not meet the criteria set for the FRD's core programmes. This was done through ad hoc grants and extensive consultation that culminated to a fully-fledged development programme known as the University Development Programme (UDP), formally launched in 1992.

In order for the NRF to plan for further intervention for increased research capacity development, it was guided by the successes and failures of its past efforts. These have brought about certain lessons for institutional research capacity development and they include research focus areas to provide a framework for the rational usage of scarce resources while maintaining diversity. Although focused approaches to research funding and support are perceived to have been successful across the Higher Education sector. Success was found to be related with institutional commitment to research and supportive leadership. This was aided by the ability to attract a core of dedicated researchers and stable working conditions where research is rewarded and recognized (Nhlapo, 2006:5).

The programme takes into consideration various government policies and legislation by aligning with following policy documents; The National Plan on Higher education (2001), The National Research and Development Strategy of DST., and the Research Strategy of DoE. In response to the challenges, the higher education sector has new funding instruments. The Higher Education landscape is constituted of fewer but more complex types of institutions that have been necessitated by mergers. This is in contrast to the recent past when South African HE landscape was easily differentiated into Historically White and Historically Black universities. New forms of institutions have now emerged and these are Universities and Universities of Technologies. The NRF is therefore called to change the manner in which it conducts its funding business in order to meet and satisfy the unique challenges faced by individual institutions in South Africa.

4.6.4 The Consortium of South African Universities

The Consortium of South African universities was formed to improve the then existing programmes through partnership and collaboration (Cross, 1999). In light of this the Universities came together to form a Consortium that combined their strengths for the central purpose of improving their existing curricula and structures for doctoral degree. However, more issues that pertain to the Consortium shall be dealt with in the following chapter.

The fellowships are part of an equity framework undertaken by the School of Education, in collaboration with the Consortium of South African School of Education and Stanford University, aimed at bringing together outstanding candidates, particularly those from a historically disadvantaged background, for systematic training in educational policy research and analysis in the quest to address institutional and national needs for highly skilled human resources and expertise. Furthermore, the funding has enabled students to concentrate on their studies without worrying about financial problems that have caused some who are not in the programme to resort to part-time work (Handbook of Doctoral Programmes, 2003).

When this Consortium was established, it was intended to use the collective pool of its members in developing the policy-making capacity of the educational system. The Consortium offers a programme which is, on one hand, of a high standard, replicable and efficient, and on the other, is able to articulate with broader social processes. Another of its aims was to address the question of previously under-represented groups of the South African society to educational opportunities. The programme, from its inception, has managed to bring formerly disadvantaged groups, notably Blacks and women of various races, into the system.

Cross (1999:1) argues that the Consortium is not only an exclusive body of five universities, but its programme is geared to providing a sustainable basis for the

enlargement of educational research capacity throughout South Africa and the region. The programme of the Consortium is unique in that it consists of a structured curriculum which introduces to the South African doctoral process course-work elements, support through mentoring, practical research experience and exposure to workplace experience through internships.

Conclusion

This chapter has attempted to draw attention to the emergency of partnerships in education and the potential they have in strengthening capacities and maximizing the investments that are needed to ensure that higher education programmes are sustainable in political, technical managerial and humanitarian terms. It has assessed the impact and the potential of partnerships in higher education through examining its implications to research training. Furthermore, it has argued that partnerships have the potential to improve the quality of research through the maximization of others' expertise. For instance, this chapter revealed that contextual issues such as shrinking budgets and the changing role of donors etc have given rise to partnerships in higher education in South Africa.