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North-South Partnerships in Public Higher Education: A Selected South African Case Study

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ABSTRACT

This study is concerned with how North-South partnerships in public higher education are managed in South Africa. It offers a global South perspective, with a particular focus on how the challenges inherent in such partnerships, which relate to imbalances in resources, knowledge and power, can be addressed. In doing so, the study highlights the need that Southern institutions have for more equal and balanced partnerships with their Northern counterparts.

Facilitated by a postcolonial framework, the study takes a critical look at North-South partnerships in South Africa, recognising that such partnerships have to be understood with the country's legacy of colonialism and apartheid in mind. In this context, a discussion of the concepts of coloniality and decoloniality is linked to transformation, decolonisation and Africanisation as some of the most pertinent issues affecting South African higher education institutions today. Furthermore, the critical discussion of North-South partnerships enables critical engagement with the global phenomenon of higher education internationalisation, which is dominated by Northern perspectives in terms of definitions, concepts and practices.

Methodologically, the study presents a qualitative, single case study, using the University of the Witwatersrand, Johannesburg, a public South African higher education institution, as the case. Careful consideration is given to questions of positionality, particularly as the researcher relies on her experiences in the sector to offer a unique practitioner-scholar perspective.

Drawing on data generated from a variety of documents and interviews, the study provides a nuanced, in-depth picture that underscores the lived realities of North-South partnerships at the University. In doing so, it critically illustrates the complexities of the notion of 'North-South' in relation to a university like Wits in a country like South Africa. Besides some practical suggestions for the attention of institutional management, it also offers conceptual insights into what partnerships and internationalisation should look like from a South African perspective.

The study advocates for the increased agency of the global South, highlighting that Southern institutions should be less complicit and less accepting of inequalities and imbalances in their partnerships with Northern counterparts. Furthermore, it argues that changing the paradigm of North-South partnerships towards more balanced engagements contributes to moving the proverbial mountain, transforming our global society into one that is socially more just. It thus adds a small cornerstone note for the ongoing process of laying new foundations for a different and more equitable future for higher education partnerships and beyond.

Keywords

North-South partnerships; Postcolonialism; Internationalisation; Transformation; Higher education; South Africa