

# Mainstreaming Multiple Knowledge Systems in the South-North Collaboration for Higher Education

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## ABSTRACT

*This paper discusses the need for a shift in the role of South-North collaboration for higher education. To do so, it points to some persistent trends in the nature of South-North partnerships. Rather than being empirically-based, the aim of the paper is to spark critical discussion and new research, drawing from the authors' collaborative experience over the last couple of years. Some suggestions for change in the field of higher education are offered.*

**Key words:** *South, North, Collaboration, Indigenous Knowledge, Higher Education*

## INTRODUCTION

The aim of this paper is to voice some criticism on mainstreaming multiple knowledge systems in the South-North research and development project collaboration in higher education. The paper points to some persistent trends in the nature of South-North collaborative partnerships, highlighting the evident need for a paradigm shift in order to facilitate the integration of knowledge systems. The authors take the position that by integrating traditional (Indigenous) and Western knowledge systems, a more equitable, just and effective research contribution in higher education may result in more sustainable development initiatives.

Literature displays the domination of Western knowledge over traditional knowledge in the South-North collaboration for higher

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education (Bradley, 2007; King, 2008; Nakabugo, Goretti, Barrett, McEvoy & Munnck, 2010). Although the matter at hand relates to the debate among academics as to what constitutes 'scientific' knowledge (Aikenhead & Ogawa, 2007; Bodeker, 2007; Liebenberg, 2013; Shizha, 2007; Shumba, 1999), for the purposes of this paper we focus on the fact that the trend in higher education collaborative partnerships has been for the 'expertise' and funding to flow *from* the North *to* the South. The reasons for this are historical and complex, directly linked to post-colonial economic imbalances and global power relations (Andreotti, 2010). International funding agencies and well-funded researchers from the North (high income countries) come to the South (low and middle income countries) to work with large research and development initiatives that tend to be biased towards Western ideas and economic interests (Fine & Szyszlo, 2013).

The authors argue that the knowledge-export model in which the North is the producer of knowledge and the South the recipient, is inequitable and unsustainable. We ask the reader to reflect on these critical questions: Must this situation persist for the foreseeable future? How can the relationship be made equitable and just? What is it that the North needs from the South besides 'raw intellectual resources' for its own sustained development? When will the expertise that resides in the South be acknowledged more fully for its capacity to govern its own development? When will knowledge generated in the South ('indigenous knowledge') be better integrated with, rather than assimilated by, the knowledge system of the North?

For lack of more suitable terms, reference to the North includes the high-income Western countries of North America and Europe. Reference to the South includes low and middle income countries, such as several countries in Africa (World Bank, 2016). North and South is often seen as a classification of societies into binary opposites of colonizer/colonized, first world/third world, haves and have-nots, distinctions that are useful for purposes of discussion but do not accurately represent the more nuanced reality of North-South relations.

In the sections that follow, we first present definitions of the concepts and terms that are important to the on-going discussion that this paper aims to further. This is followed by a few 'vignettes' that illustrate very simply how very suppressed is traditional knowledge.

Then we return to the questions posed above with particular regard to the need for a paradigm shift in collaborative partnerships for higher education.

## CONCEPTS AND TERMS UNDERLYING MULTIPLE KNOWLEDGE SYSTEMS

### Indigenous knowledge

Indigenous knowledge is not about the 'other', rather, it belongs to all in that it refers to 'a body of knowledge associated with long-term occupancy of a certain place...to traditional norms and social values as well as to mental constructs that guide, organize, and regulate a people's way of living' (Sefa Dei, Hall & Rosenberg, 2000, p. 6; Souza Santos, 2008). The basic component of any society's knowledge system is its indigenous knowledge. It encompasses the values, skills, experiences and insights of people, applied to maintain or improve their livelihood (World Bank, 1997). Stated differently and in the more anthropological sense in which the term is used, indigenous knowledge reflects the dynamic way in which the residents of an area organize local knowledge, cultural beliefs, and history to enhance their lives (Semali & Kincheloe, 1999). To these definitions one may add the wisdom of elders, and oral and other cultural modes of knowledge transmission to the young (Nsamenang & Tschombe, 2011; Serpell, 2007). The word *indigenous* may also be used very specifically to refer to a particular ethno-linguistic group of people who self-identify as a social group bounded by common traditions, social norms, and sense of belonging in a particular location within a larger societal context. In this article we use the word *indigenous* to point to local ways of knowing.

Indigenous knowledges<sup>3</sup> are ways of knowing or being that are unique to a given culture, as in local beliefs about how young people are to be socialised. Indigenous knowledge is rooted in tradition as a body of knowledge that is transmitted or passed on within a society or social group in specified ways, often taught with a goal, systematically and explicitly. That is, while indigenous knowledge may or may not be

<sup>3</sup> Although use of the plural form of the word knowledge, *knowledges*, may be jarring to some readers, it is now used regularly in academia to indicate clearly that knowledge (like literacy--*literacies*) is a plural phenomenon.

written down, it is organised, sometimes with clear distinctions relating for instance, to gender socialisation. Although indigenous knowledge is embedded in culture (Nieto, 2010) it has unique purpose, advancing specific beliefs and worldviews. For example, a nomadic hunting-gathering group may pass on its knowledge about edible and medicinal plants, as well as about visual evidence in the immediate environment of the presence of animals that are a source of food. Another example lies in some parents' beliefs about the signs of intelligence in a young child, signs that may be at odds with intelligence theory that the same child's teachers acquire in their university training programmes (Serpell, 2011). Indigenous knowledge contrasts starkly with much of the development discourse of the North, yet the foregoing conceptions of indigenous knowledge would not exclude the dominant, Western knowledge system of the North, complex and highly differentiated especially in terms of occupational structures, as that may be. We need to ask where, how and why certain features of Western knowledge continue to be constructed and disseminated *from* the North *to* the South (Chilisa, 2012; Nakabugo et al., 2010).

Attention to indigenous knowledge is important for several reasons. Some indigenous knowledge has been absorbed into global knowledge and thus lost, as Gerdes (2005) notes in his work in the field of ethno mathematics. Indigenous knowledges may also be at risk of disappearing because of the intrusion of foreign technologies or development projects that promise short-term gains or solutions to problems without offering ways of sustaining those gains (Fine & Szyszlo, 2013); indigenous knowledge thus needs to be better understood and utilised with respect, within development initiatives (World Bank, 1997). There is also an increasing emphasis on the need to sensitise the academic community as well as teacher educators, North and South, to the diverse knowledges and ways of knowing, especially of historically oppressed and marginalised communities that have been excluded from the hegemonic, Western, and dominant knowledge production system. Communities that come to mind include the San of southern Africa, the Himba of Namibia, the Australian Aboriginals, the Inuit of Canada's north, the Misak of Colombia, and the Saami of northern Scandinavia (Assie-Lumumba, 2012; Nyambe & Wilmot, 2012; Rowan, 2010, 2017; Turunen & Maatta, 2013).

Although the cited research on marginalised groups attempts to integrate indigenous knowledges into an integrated knowledge

system, stumbling blocks remain. There are questions, not all valid, about the nature of these types of knowledge, their philosophical base, the standard by which they are to be validated, and the direction to which they move scholarship (Briggs, 2005; Shizha, 2007). Such discussion is framed within the post-colonial / post-modern paradigm that puts forward relational ontology (social reality), epistemology (ways of knowing) and axiology (ethics and value systems) as a theoretical framework (Andreotti, 2010; Chilisa, 2012, xv). This is a paradigm that has its own theoretical assumptions about the research process and the appropriate approach to systematic inquiry (methodology).

### **Post-Colonialism**

Briefly, colonialism has been defined as the subjugation of one group by another; it involves the loss of control and ownership of a group's knowledge system, beliefs, customs and often languages. Post-colonialism refers to the lasting impact over time of colonialism on a former colonised country as in what has been reported to be a captive and colonised mind (Altatas, 2004; Chilisa, 2012; Fanon, 1967; Ngugi wa Thiong'o, 1986; Wong-Fillmore, 1991). Colonialism has been extended into a contemporary relationship between colonial societies and the former colonisers in which, 'a group of countries, generally the first world, are in position of investing capital; another group, generally third world, provides the field for investments...' (Spivak, 1988, p. 287). The term 'post-colonial' thus describes the continuous struggle of previously colonised peoples to resist suppression of their ways of knowing in light of the spread of Euro-western knowledge through the processes of globalisation.

### **Globalisation**

The term globalisation most often refers to the integration of economic activity across borders, to the spread of people and ideas shaped by technology, institutions, and policy (Wolf, 2014), as a process in which events, decisions, activities, and products in one part of the world can significantly affect communities in other parts of the world (McGrew & Lewis, 1992). Globalisation has implications for the development of higher education due to 'the economic, political and societal forces pushing 21<sup>st</sup> century higher education toward greater international involvement' (Altbach & Knight, 2007, p. 290).

## **Development**

The term development, in the context of this paper, refers to the economic, social, educational and other changes taking place in a country in the effort to improve the lives and livelihoods of the population (UNESCO, 1987; 2015). With regard to higher education we ask how South-North collaboration in higher education can contribute to shared intellectual and academic interests, doctoral education, quality supervision of graduate students, and mutually intelligible forms of institutional governance. How can collaboration tackle development problems such as poverty alleviation and the eradication of disease? To the extent that development issues or problems reside in the South, does the South not 'own' the problems and therefore have the right to set, if not co-define the agenda, even if the financial resources come from the North? (Barnes & Browne, 2011). Clearly, we are pointing here to the entrenched and persistent asymmetry in South-North power relations.

## **Partnership**

We use the term partnership to refer to research and formal linkages between academics and /or institutions located in the South and the North. Such partnerships are often embodied in Memoranda of Understanding (MOU) that outline in detail the goals, parameters, limits, scope and responsibilities of what is to be accomplished, by whom and which institution, over what period of time. It is within such documents that the financial commitments are set out, stating precisely the source of funds for the partnership, as well as what may or may not be covered by the funding—e.g. travel, accommodation, per diems, salaries, equipment, student and faculty exchanges. Close examination of an MOU will indicate the extent to which the funding agency in the North is to benefit from the partnership while providing 'development aid' to the institution in the South.

A partnership then refers to an on-going and long-term process of collaboration, and in particular to the effort to achieve equitable, fair and balanced exchanges in research, teaching and development projects that are of mutual benefit, in which the long-standing North-South power asymmetry is dismantled (Bailey & Dolan, 2011).

## **POLARISED KNOWLEDGE SYSTEMS WITHIN SOUTH-NORTH HIGHER EDUCATION**

The following three vignettes illustrate the undermining of traditional knowledge systems.

*1. When I began my doctoral thesis, I was concerned about how to truthfully express my experiences and those of my indigenous colleagues who speak freely of spiritual experiences as an integral part of our research process, while quite aware that such expressions are held suspect within Western academia. When I discussed my concerns regarding the articulation of the spiritual aspects of research with the supervisors of my PhD research, they told me that I could not mention spiritual experience within my thesis.... if I did, it would not be considered valid social science (Chilisa, 2012, p. 293).*

*2. In the 20 studies considered appropriate for inclusion in a recent article in The Lancet on the importance of the World Bank focus on early childhood education for development in Africa, none of the studies cited were led by African scholars (Anonymous).*

*3. It is not just that there is a moral obligation to help those less fortunate than ourselves, it is a practical issue: damage done to the poor is likely to rebound on the rich...Unequal policies which favor the rich are fundamentally uneconomic: they waste resources, human resources (Penn, 2012).*

The fourth vignette illustrates an effort to integrate knowledge systems while the last and fifth points to the kind of attitude held by a northern researcher that is necessary to promote the integration of knowledge systems.

*4. A teacher education program in Canada for immigrant and refugee women spent 18 months drawing on the women's attitudes and knowledges brought from their home countries in order to integrate them into the new knowledges that they would need to understand in order to be employed in their new setting (Prochner, Kirova, Cleghorn & Massing, 2014).*

*5. Great challenges to human health and development persist. The more that the expertise and skills locked within the human*

*capital of low income countries can be tapped and expressed,  
the better off we all will be (Deonanden, 2013).*

## **Global partnership for development in higher education**

The above vignettes bemoan the dominance of ‘modern’ knowledge over traditional knowledge while also pointing to the frequently taken-for-granted dominance of the system of the North. Why might that dominance be taken for granted, even by some in the South? Universities of the South are under pressure to respond to the needs and problems of society, to illustrate the relevance of local ways of knowing to the ‘global knowledge system’; they are also under pressure to internationalise their higher education institutions, which may increase interaction with institutions of the North, while at the same time further invite the dominance of Northern discourse (Deonanden, 2013; Matengu, Likando & Kangumu, 2014).

Internationalisation is part of the higher education globalisation movement i.e. the ongoing process of interconnectedness and interdependence of people, institutions, societies and nations, as a result of increasing worldwide integration and interaction of political, economic, social, technological and ecological systems (Beissinger & Young, 2015). It is in this context that educational scholars such as Chilisa (2012), Fataar (2011), Gillborn (2008), Serpell (2007), Smith (1999), and Spivak (1988) have discussed the need to make connections amongst indigenous, multicultural and local-global discourses on knowledge production, in order to better understand contemporary issues of difference, diversity, equity and social justice. The globalisation movement may then be the main force fuelling the integration of knowledge systems through higher education partnerships that are focused on social, economic and intellectual empowerment, with a prime example coming from the Irish African Partnership Model (Nakabugo et al., 2010). In brief, the Irish African partnership model brought nine universities in Ireland together with four universities in Africa to collaborate and coordinate research in health, education, gender and communication technologies (Nakabugo, et al., 2010, p. 89).

## **Towards a paradigm shift in higher education in South-North collaboration**

Indigenous perspectives are often part of the worldview of African scholars, many of whom received their higher education degrees in the North. Due to this experience they are in an ideal position to speak to the matter of integrating local knowledges with the global. For instance, spirituality and multiple connections with the living and non-living that some scholars share with others within their communities of practice may well inform how they see the world, how they think, the research questions they raise and how they conduct research (Chilisa & Preece, 2005; Nsamenang & Tchombe, 2011). This is not unique to Bantu or Aboriginal Australians or the Inuit in Canada or the Amerindians. As mentioned earlier, this dynamic body of knowledge may not be written down, however, it is organised and sometimes referred to philosophically as 'embodied knowing' (De Castell, 1990; Longhurst, 2009). As such, it throws into question certain aspects of established protocols for ethical conduct in research. For example, guidelines for the conduct of ethical research as found in Canada and the United States dictate that it is mandatory to obtain informed consent prior to conducting interviews with research participants. However, when interviewing spiritual mediums in the course of research to develop knowledge about an indigenous group's belief system, the researcher cannot obtain informed consent while the research participant is spiritually possessed. The philosophy that underpins an indigenous research approach and the method of data collection under certain conditions must therefore be broadened or else research on certain topics is simply excluded from entering the global, integrated knowledge system. Research ethics guidelines of the North need to be expanded to include perspectives of the South (Jegade, 2009; Tri-Council Guidelines, Canada, 2010). Clearly, the mainstream research protocols that originated from the North are not inclusive of indigenous ways of knowing, raising serious questions for continued dialogue in the shaping of higher education partnerships.

Although there is a terrible inertia from the North and the South to change the current nature of the North-South agenda, many on both sides of existing partnerships are troubled or unsure about post-colonial indigenous perspectives. For example, as one of the above vignettes illustrates, Chilisa (2012, p. 293) highlights many

stories about ‘dissertation topics, theoretical frameworks, methods of collecting data, ethics protocols, data analysis procedures, and modes of reporting’ – those emanating from a post-colonial indigenous perspective – that were found unacceptable to the students’ supervisors, dissertation committees, university and ethics review boards from the South and North. Then, in another vein, Namaddu (1989, p. 28) reports ‘our own history, culture and practices, good or bad, are rediscovered and translated into the academic journals of the North and come back to us re-conceptualised, couched in languages and paradigms which make it all sound new and novel’. The echo heard here is that researchers from the North are seen to abscond with indigenous knowledge that has been generated in the South.

Critical education scholars are concerned with the working relationships in current and future higher education partnerships. The most troubling aspect is funding cross-cultural research partnerships, and partnerships for executing the global partnership for the post-2015 development agenda. A framework is needed that brings methods, techniques and methodologies used by global post-colonial and indigenous scholars that decolonise and indigenise worldviews (Gyoh, 2009). Waghid (2011) noted that what comes from the South or the North should not be ignored simply because it ascribes to indigenous ways of knowing. Instead of polarising the North and South, the two conceptions of knowledge and knowledge production systems should be seen as complementary to the advancement of global partnerships for development. By marginalising publications from the South and ignoring the international demand for integrating knowledge systems, rich contributions to contemporary solutions are thwarted.

The process of globalisation has fuelled the internationalisation of higher education. And internationalisation implies that there should be strategic proposals from the South to implement each region’s development goals to achieve the targets. However, there is a need to further critique the still-dominant model of knowledge production that continues to deny the previously colonised and historically marginalised other spaces to communicate from their own particular frames of reference (Shumba, 1999). We suggest that the relationships between donors, partners, insiders and outsiders, should be fluid and shifting, influenced by elements of the socio-cultural-historical context (Crossley, Arthur & McNess, 2016).

## **Implications for educators and teacher education among HE in the South-North collaboration**

In this article we consider the term *globalisation* to have a sinister edge to it because it includes the spread of academic theories and education policies, mainly from North to South, about what educators need or ought to know (e.g. child development, play-based learning, intelligence theory) (Cleghor & Prochner, 2010; Gonzales, 1999; Shizha, 2005). These theories and policies increasingly are borrowed from the North and incorporated into the curricula of courses taught in institutions of higher education in the South. The encounter with this 'global discourse' can give rise to tensions between local ideas and global prescriptions for preparing teachers, putting into question the validity of teachers' experiential knowledge, for example. As Deonanden (2013) pointed out, this global discourse also has the effect of undermining African researchers' confidence in their ability to compete on the 'world stage' of publishing research in international academic journals. Thus, it may be the task of senior academics in higher education institutions in the South to instil a culture of critical pedagogy in teacher educators and future teachers so that they will recognise and challenge those moments when local ways of knowing are suppressed by global 'implants' in the curriculum (Andreotti, 2006). Here we have in mind curriculum development that is based on local research, and the selection of text materials that are culturally appropriate (Gupta, 2008; Steiner-Khamsi, 2004). Education policy makers, Ministry of Education officers, senior university administrators, and teacher educators would do well to consider the different forms of knowledge that inform their practice so that the outcomes continue to improve along with the quality of education at all levels, from preschool to postgraduate. Educators North and South are best equipped for 'education for all' when sensitised to the diverse knowledges that attend to students in their classrooms, including members of their societies' non-dominant groups. Such awareness among teacher educators also stands to open up discussion about what it is that indigenous communities need to share with higher education institutions, and how small-scale local partnerships could be developed.

## **CONCLUSIONS**

This paper has explored processes and constraints to mainstreaming multiple knowledge systems in the South-North collaboration for higher education. Several questions were asked to respond to what could be done if the situation persists in the foreseeable future. The power struggle continues, centred on the validity of knowledge systems, and on worldviews that differ in fundamental ways about who is to control the higher education research agenda. In the views of the authors, the relationship can be made equitable and just by ensuring that formal agreements or Memoranda of Understanding (MOUs), for collaboration in higher education are developed equally by representatives of the South and the North. In this regard, the emphasis must be on sustainability of development efforts in the South, not on the need of the North for 'raw intellectual resources' for its own continued development. It is perhaps this power struggle that needs first to be at the centre of the South-North dialogue before more truly equitable partnerships can be established.

Secondly, the need for parity could be realised if the expertise that resides in the South is acknowledged for its capacity to govern its own development. Two features of the unequal South-North relationship have been particularly highlighted in this paper. This can be achieved, for example, by ensuring that collaborative agreements include equal amounts of funding for lecturers and student, two-way exchanges wherein the expertise and knowledge generated in the South become more visible in the North. In such ways it will be possible to integrate knowledge systems rather than simply assimilate indigenous knowledge into the knowledge system of the North.

We have also pointed to the systemic constraints that many academics in the South experience, especially engaging as equal partners in research, thwarting their opportunities for publishing in internationally recognised academic journals. We have underlined what seems to be a persistent lack of recognition by some of the academic community of the North that knowledge generated in the South stands to contribute importantly to the academic discourse of

higher education worldwide and ultimately, to internationally agreed-upon development objectives. We have aimed to describe the varied and complex ways in which higher education partnerships have been undermined by complex historical and contemporary power relations, as well as mutual mistrust. In some projects, it needs to be said that situation has at times been reversed with the content of projects largely dominated by the indigenous beliefs of the participating community without recognising the partners from the North who might have spearheaded the venture.

In order to take stock and look forward there are several points that researchers, North and South, need to explore more fully by continuing to re-conceptualise higher education partnerships while working alongside international colleagues. Can those from the North let go of that control in order to achieve true collaboration, with jointly conceived studies and publications based on indigenous epistemologies? What are the prospects for true, moral and ethical collaboration if some from the South choose to be silenced, paralysed and unproductive because of lack of human capacity, capacity building, capacity replacement and capacity replenishment, infrastructure and resources? How long will it take to retract the long established patterns that acknowledge academic researchers from the North to always take the lead? Clearly, there is still a huge legacy of colonialism to be grappled with.

In sum, a comprehensive higher education partnership cannot be imposed, it can only be co-constructed. This requires participation, co-ownership and mutual empowerment with deep insights of personal agency (individual freedom and responsibility) and active vigilance. Equitable dialogue is required when drafting South-North higher education partnership agreements. The partners need to have fully and equitably negotiated plans and contingencies for the outcomes and possible unintended consequences of the partnership.

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