BRITISH COUNCIL

Research

Mapping and diagnostics for the Building Equitable Partnerships in Africa (BEPA) Higher Education project

Final Report

November 2024

www.britishcouncil.org

This report was commissioned by the British Council SSA regional higher education team and prepared by Technopolis

Authors

Holly Chard (Technopolis)

Adam Krcal (Technopolis)

With support from

Stéphanie Abogne (Technopolis)

Adebisi Adewusi (Technopolis)

Patrick Balliet (Technopolis)

Roger Konan (Technopolis)

Olivia Adou (Technopolis)

Yasmin Koné (Technopolis)

British Council team

Etom Ofem (British Council, Nigeria)

Prince Chima (British Council, Nigeria)

Meekness Lunga-Ayidu (British Council, Sub-Saharan Africa)

Table of Contents

Table of Figures

Executive Summary

This report presents the findings of the "Building Equitable Partnerships in Africa" (BEPA) Higher Education project, commissioned by the British Council Nigeria.

The study examines the dynamics of equity, mutual benefit, and sustainability in higher education partnerships across Sub-Saharan Africa (SSA), focusing on Ghana, Kenya, Nigeria, and South Africa.

The study's findings shed light on existing practices, challenges, and opportunities for fostering balanced, impactful collaborations between African higher education institutions (HEIs) and international partners.

Equity and mutual benefit in international Higher Education partnerships

Equity remains a central concern in international partnerships. Historically, many collaborations have been led by institutions in the Global North, which often dominate decision-making and set priorities. African partners frequently find themselves relegated to secondary roles, handling data collection or implementation tasks while their Northern counterparts manage research design, budget allocation, and dissemination of findings.

Despite these challenges, our research shows that some progress is evident. Drivers of equity include transparent communication, mutual respect, and greater acknowledgment of African expertise and knowledge systems. These elements form the foundation for more balanced relationships.

Mutual benefit is another critical component of successful partnerships. True collaboration ensures that all partners reap equitable rewards, such as opportunities for leadership, co-authorship in publications, and capacity building. While partnerships can yield significant advantages, African stakeholders often report mixed experiences, particularly regarding the alignment of project objectives with local priorities.

Many African partners also lack equal access to funding and decision-making processes. This discrepancy underscores the need for intentional practices that prioritise co-creation, shared leadership, and the integration of local concerns into partnership goals.

Sustainability in international Higher Education Partnerships

The sustainability of partnerships also emerges as a significant challenge. Many collaborations are heavily dependent on funding from the Global North, raising questions about their long-term viability.

Embedding sustainability requires targeted efforts to build capacity within African HEIs, including leadership development, improved resource management, and infrastructure enhancement. Stakeholders highlighted the importance of addressing inequalities by including women, marginalised groups, and youth in partnership initiatives to ensure inclusivity and broaden the impact of outcomes on African communities.

Challenges in partnerships

The study identifies several persistent barriers to effective partnerships. Power imbalances, often rooted in funding structures and Northern-centric agenda-setting, continue to limit the potential of African institutions.

Many HEIs in Africa face additional constraints, including limited administrative capacity, outdated infrastructure, and overburdened academic staff, which hinder their ability to engage fully in partnerships. Moreover, cultural and contextual misunderstandings between partners can exacerbate inequities, emphasising the need for greater awareness and flexibility, particularly on the part of Northern partners.

Best practices in partnerships

Based on stakeholders' feedback, the report highlights several best practices and opportunities for progress.

Co-creation, joint agenda-setting, and shared leadership roles have been identified by stakeholders as key pathways to more equitable partnerships. Frameworks such as the Africa Charter on equitable research partnerships offer practical guidelines to enhance collaboration and emphasise the importance of listening to African perspectives on equity.

Furthermore, integrating indigenous knowledge and adopting decolonised approaches to research can make partnerships more relevant and impactful for local contexts in Africa.

Maximising the benefits and impacts of international partnerships for African partners

The findings of the study carry important implications for funders, African HEIs, and institutions in the Global North.

Funders must adopt more inclusive risk management strategies, allowing African institutions to lead projects and directly manage funds while ensuring accountability.

Within partnerships, transparent allocation of resources and equitable involvement in decision-making will foster trust and enhance equity. To achieve this, Northern HEIs need to embrace co-creation and actively counter existing power dynamics by sharing authority in decision-making.

At the same time, African HEIs should also take proactive steps to articulate their priorities and strengths, engaging more confidently in agenda-setting and advocating for roles that build their institutional capacity.

Partnerships must also prioritise the inclusion of women and underrepresented groups to ensure equitable opportunities within HEIs. Empowering women, minorities, and young people not only addresses systemic inequities but also enhances innovation, sustainability, and the social impact of these partnerships by tapping into a diverse range of perspectives and talents.

Capacity-building initiatives, such as technical training and infrastructure investment, should become integral elements of international partnerships. Institutionalising the benefits of partnerships also helps to secure long-term benefits for African HEIs and increases their resilience, by reducing dependence on short-term grant funding.

Moving forward together for Africa

In conclusion, the BEPA study emphasises the urgency of fostering equitable, mutually beneficial, and sustainable higher education partnerships in Sub-Saharan Africa.

By addressing historical power imbalances and amplifying the voices and expertise of African partners, international collaborations can achieve greater inclusivity, relevance, and long-term impact.

This report provides crucial insights for funders and HEIs in both the Global North and Sub-Saharan Africa, which will empower them to take meaningful steps toward more balanced and effective international higher education partnerships.

> "From a policy perspective, it is crucial for Africans to write their own policies and be at the forefront of conceptualising, developing, and implementing initiatives that speak to our unique contexts. While we can learn from other regions, we should not be passive observers. Instead, we must stand up, take charge, and shape our own destiny."
>
> HE stakeholder, South Africa

Glossary

Key terms

Decolonisation: An ongoing process of undoing the impacts of colonialism on social, cultural, political, and economic structures.

Equity: Giving people who are marginalised or disadvantaged what they need to succeed, by focusing on equality of outcomes rather than equality of opportunity.

Global North Economically developed and industrialized countries, typically located in the northern hemisphere, including nations in North America and Europe.

Global South: Economically developing or emerging countries, primarily located in Africa, Latin America, Asia, and the Pacific.

Higher Education Institution: An organisation that offers undergraduate, graduate and research programmes, including universities and other institutions such as vocational colleges.

Higher Education Stakeholder: A person with an interest in Higher Education, including lecturers, researchers, academic managers, project partners and policy-makers.

Inclusion: Removing barriers to access and participation.

Indigenous: Relating to the people and practices of lands that were later colonised.

Marginalised communities: Communities who lack decision-making powers and representation in public spaces and roles.

Sustainability: The ability to maintain the impact and mission of a project in the long term, beyond the end of the project itself.

Third Mission: Higher Education's engagement with the wider community, focusing on applying knowledge to addressing societal and economic challenges.

UN Sustainable Development Goals: A set of global objectives established by the United Nations to address social, economic, and environmental challenges.

Abbreviations

ARUA: African Research Universities Alliance

BEPA: Building Equitable Partnerships in Africa

EDI: Equity, Diversity, and Inclusion

GCRF: Global Challenges Research Fund

HEI: Higher Education Institution

NGO: Non-Governmental Organization

ODA: Overseas Development Aid

PARC: Perivoli Africa Research Centre

SDGs: Sustainable Development Goals,

SPHEIR: Strategic Partnerships for Higher Education Innovation and Reform

SSA: Sub-Saharan Africa

TNE: Transnational Education

UKCDR: UK Collaborative on Development Research

1 Introduction

This is the Final Report on the Mapping and diagnostics for the Building Equitable Partnerships in Africa (BEPA) Higher Education project, which was commissioned by the British Council and undertaken by Technopolis.

The report is structured as follows:

- This chapter (Chapter 1) presents the scope and purpose of this study

- Chapter 2 describes the design and conduct of this study

- Chapter 3 presents a synthesis of the findings for Sub-Saharan Africa

- Chapter 4 presents the implications from the study

1.1   Purpose of the study

The overall objective of the study was to understand the current state of play concerning equity in partnerships in Sub-Saharan Africa. The sub-objectives of the study were the following:

- To assess the current landscape of international partnerships

- To conduct a thorough analysis of existing collaborations, understanding their structures, and evaluating the degree of equity and mutual benefit

- To delve into the historical context, identifying patterns that have contributed to disparities, and explore opportunities for more balanced representation

- To identify challenges and opportunities specifically faced by African partners and to provide insights into unique obstacles they face

- To identify and build case studies of existing good practice partnerships on the African Continent

The study covered Sub-Saharan Africa, with a focus on Ghana, Kenya, Nigeria and South Africa.

1.2   Scope of the study

This study covered a broad variety of international higher education partnerships in Sub-Saharan Africa (SSA), with emphasis placed on the four focus countries (Ghana, Kenya, Nigeria and South Africa). This geographic focus was reflected in the mapping component of the study, the choice of interviewees, the survey analysis and case studies. The study considered partnerships between SSA and partners in both the Global North and the Global South. As the study covered only international partnerships, only those partnerships where the partners came from at least two countries were included.

The types of partnerships within the scope included:

- Partnerships with two or more partner organisations, including at least one higher education institutions. Non-HEI partners could be of any type, including NGOs, governments and their agencies, research institutes, private sector organisations, and community organisations.

- Government-to-government partnerships were beyond the scope, as were individual-to-individual partnerships

- Partnerships could focus on research, teaching and learning, and the third mission of higher education (i.e. addressing societal and economic issues), or a combination of these areas

2 Methodological note

2.1 Design of the study

The study used a pragmatic, mixed methods approach, making use of available evidence from both primary and secondary (qualitative and quantitative) sources to provide robust and transparent assessment of equity in higher education partnerships in Sub-Saharan Africa.

Table 1 below provides an overview of the research questions for the study and where they are addressed in this report. Practical guidance on how to ensure equity, mutual benefit, and sustainability in international partnerships can be found in the accompanying Partnerships Toolkit.

Table 1: Research questions aligned to the final report headings / sections

Research questions as per the Terms of Reference	Final report heading / section
What steps can partnering institutions take to ensure that relationships are equitable?	Equity and mutual benefit in international HE partnerships
What steps can partnering institutions take to ensure that partnerships relationships are mutually beneficial?	
What steps can partner institutions take to ensure that relationships are sustainable?	Sustainability of international HE partnerships
To what extent is such impact intended and built into partnership approaches from the beginning? (What are the drivers behind such intended impact?)	Equity and mutual benefit in international HE partnerships / Sustainability of international HE partnerships
Is there evidence of how teaching partnerships (for instance through TNE) contribute to sustainable development and strengthen local capacity and capabilities? and how widespread is this impact of TNE?	Impact of TNE and education partnerships
And what models of TNE are best suited to contributing to the international education partnership outcomes?	
What forms of international research collaboration have had the greatest impactful outcomes?	Impact of research partnerships
What evidence exists of how other forms of an institution's global engagement may impact on international education development outcomes?	Impact of TNE and education partnerships
How have international partnerships had an impact at a local level (either within partner institutions and/or within the immediate society)?	Impact of TNE and education partnerships / Impact of international HE partnerships
What are the most cost-effective partnership models? (Is there a form of partnership/collaboration which has made particularly significant contribution to development for a low investment?)	
Is there evidence of how inter-institutional international collaboration has been a necessary contributory factor in achieving impact (e.g. evidence of where a desired impact would not have happened without the international partnership)?	
How are universities embedding the sustainability of international partnerships, and intended impact in their culture and practice?	Sustainability of international HE partnerships
Do these partnerships have EDI principles and have a framework that promotes outcomes that include women, youths and other marginalised groups? What was the outcome?	

2.2   Conduct of the study

The study was carried out in three phases between July 2024 and October 2024:

- Phase 1 – Inception
- Phase 2 – Research
- Phase 3 – Analysis and Reporting

2.2.1   Phase 1 – Inception

In the inception phase, the study team conducted preliminary desk research and an initial literature review. Eight scoping interviews were conducted, in a semi-structured format, which developed understanding of the scope and priorities of the study within the British Council.

The findings from the inception phase were used to further develop the methodology, data collection tools, and approach to in-country data collection, and also feed into the final analysis for this study.

2.2.2   Phase 2 – Research

The phase of the study involved the main fieldwork and data collection:

Literature review

The literature review helped to determine what research has already been conducted on international higher education partnerships in Sub Saharan Africa. Using a systematic search strategy, a wide range of literature was reviewed, including academic and grey literature, previous British Council studies, other studies and evaluations on partnerships, policy and strategy documents.

The data and information collected through the literature review was analysed from five main perspectives:

- What are current evidence-based perspectives on equity, mutual benefit and sustainability in international partnerships?
- What are the drivers and challenges in relation to equitable and sustainable partnerships?
- What are the key issues and/or evidence gaps on which our further data collection should focus?

- Are there other sources of evidence or ongoing projects referenced in the literature which could be of relevance to the study?
- What international partnerships are referenced and discussed in the literature?

The literature was, therefore, used in the following ways:

- To develop insights on key concepts relating to equity, mutual benefit and sustainability in partnerships
- To enhance and/or support findings emerging from the analysis of the other collected data
- To identify examples of best practice relating to equity, mutual benefit and sustainability in partnerships
- To identify international higher education partnerships and relevant stakeholders

Desk research and partnership mapping

The study team used desk research to map the landscape of international higher education partnerships in Sub-Saharan Africa. The mapping prioritised existing HE partnerships operating in the four focus countries (Ghana, Kenya, Nigeria and South Africa), the partnership models and their funding sources.

The primary aim of the mapping was to better understand the current status of international higher education partnerships, including:

- How existing (and recently completed) partnerships function in terms of their setup; Leadership and division of responsibility amongst partners;
- Their focus (e.g. research, teaching or third mission) and activities;
- Indications of outcomes and impact;
- Other features (e.g. funders, budget, duration, geography)

The findings from this mapping are presented in greater depth in the Country Profiles which form the Annexes to this report.

The mapping task did not aim to provide a comprehensive list of all international higher education partnerships in Africa, as this would not be feasible. Rather, the mapping provides an overview of the partnership landscape that captures the diversity of partnerships in the four focus countries, reflecting a variety of different attributes that are informed by the research questions.

Alongside the mapping of partnerships, the study team used a combination of desk research and data collected through the interviews and survey to develop profiles of the higher education landscape in Ghana, Kenya, Nigeria and South Africa. The Country Profiles (supplied as Annexes to this report) provide crucial context for understanding both the shared and unique challenges and opportunities in the focus countries.

Stakeholder survey

We designed and conducted an online survey of higher education stakeholders in the four focus countries (Ghana, Kenya, Nigeria and South Africa). The primary purpose of the survey was to collect quantitative data on the research areas identified in the research questions. The survey was also used to collect further data on specific partnerships, as well as some qualitative data on drivers and barriers to equity and sustainability in partnerships.

The survey was targeted at various types of stakeholders. The primary target was HEIs in the four countries (leadership representatives, international relations officers, as well as individuals in charge of managing HEIs' participation in international partnerships). The survey was also distributed to representative bodies (e.g. associations of HEIs in the countries), public sector bodies, and funding organisations.

The goal of the survey was to receive as many relevant responses as possible from stakeholders in Sub-Saharan Africa. The survey was not targeted at a specific sample of the population of HE stakeholders. This was because it was not possible to calculate the entire population size across the four focus countries and to map the population's characteristics.

A more detailed overview of the demographics of survey respondents is appended to this report, but **Error! Reference source not found.** presents a breakdown of respondents by country/region.

Table 2: Survey responses by country/region

Country / Region	Number of survey respondents
Ghana	23
Kenya	26
Nigeria	49
South Africa	20
Other countries in Sub-Saharan Africa	7
United Kingdom	12
Other	8
Total	**145**

To improve the user-friendliness of the survey, respondents were able to skip questions. This means that not all survey questions received 145 responses. The analysis of survey data also includes cross-tabulation to focus on subsets within the data (e.g. responses from specific countries, breakdown of responses by lead partner). Again, this means that the corresponding charts and statistics focus on a smaller sample of responses.

For clarity, the report includes the number of responses, 'n', for specific questions, i.e. n=75 means that 75 respondents completed the question. Where the number of responses were particularly low, this is noted in text.

Interviews with HE stakeholders

We gathered additional qualitative data via in-depth interviews with a variety of stakeholders across the four focus countries (Ghana, Kenya, Nigeria and South Africa) and in the Global North. The interviews had a semi-structured format and topic guides were tailored to different stakeholder types.

We used a purposive sampling frame, selecting interviewees from each of the focus countries and from the Global North who also represented a range of different stakeholder types.

The selection of interviewees was guided by the scoping interviews, desk research, and preliminary data from the survey, as well as knowledge from within the British Council and Technopolis. When identifying interviewees, we looked for relevant experience of partnerships and/or international projects.

A full list of interviewees is appended to this report. Table 3 presents the number of interviews conducted by country/region.

Table 3: Conducted interviews by country/region

Country / Region	Number of interviewees
Ghana	6
Kenya	6
Nigeria	6
South Africa	6
United Kingdom and Global North	12
Total	36

Phase 3 – Analysis and reporting

The third and final stage of the study consisted of analysing the evidence gathered during the various stages of the project. The study team collated all of the evidence collected during the inception and research phases. During the analysis, we focused on identifying emerging trends and patterns concerning equity and sustainability in partnerships, within and across the focus countries, as well as drivers and barriers.

Using a triangulated approach to the evidence, we synthesised the evidence from individual data collection tasks to arrive at a robust assessment based on multiple sources of evidence. The synthesis of findings was structured according to the research questions.

2.3   Limitations of the study

The main limitations of the study concern the representativeness of primary data.

As already noted, the stakeholder survey was open to a wide range of respondents because it was not possible to use a sampling frame. This means the data is not necessarily representative of the entire population of HE stakeholders in the four focus countries.

Finally, the scope of the study meant that, while the interviews were a source of valuable qualitative data and insight, they may not capture all viewpoints or experiences of stakeholders across the focus countries.

3 Findings

This chapter presents the findings and conclusions of the study on the level of Sub-Saharan Africa. These are structured around discussions of, and answers to, the research questions which are grouped thematically using the approach outlined in Table 1

Where possible, we aim to identify trends and areas of consensus. If significant differences were observed between different types of stakeholders and/or data sources, these are acknowledged in the discussion.

3.1 Equity and mutual benefit in international HE partnerships

This section of the report focuses on the following research questions:

- What steps can partnering institutions take to ensure that relationships are equitable?

- What steps can partnering institutions take to ensure that partnerships relationships are mutually beneficial?

We also take into account the research question concerning the extent to which these features are built into partnerships from the beginning. As relevant, we also discuss the role that funders can play in supporting equitable partnerships.

Understanding equity in partnerships

International partnerships are widely recognised as playing a key role in tackling global development challenges and driving progress towards the United Nations Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs).

The UN defines a multi-stakeholder partnership as: *"An ongoing collaborative relationship between or among organisations from different stakeholder types aligning their interests around a common vision, combining their complementary resources and competencies and sharing risk, to maximise value creation towards the Sustainable Development Goals and deliver benefit to each of the partners."[1]*

While there are many different forms of partnership, a key feature is that they are more than a one-off project and require time, effort and commitment to succeed. Moreover, successful partnerships not only need to create benefits and value for all partners, but also provide a clear "value-add" and "Collaborative Advantages".[2] In other words, a partnership should create greater impact than the partners could generate working alone.

In the context of higher education, North-South partnerships have become increasingly popular and prevalent in HEIs' internationalisation strategies.

> **"Partnerships are very important and are reflected in continental and national strategies of higher education. International partnerships are considered as a vehicle for sustainable development and societal impact. It is the vehicle or the mechanism through which we can elicit impact."**
>
> HE stakeholder, Ghana

> **"In South Africa, universities facilitate and coordinate partnerships through a multifaceted approach, guided by internationalization strategies that have become more prominent over the past few years."**
>
> HE stakeholder, South Africa

---

[1] The SDG Partnership Guidebook, p.23

[2] Ibid, p.34

Moreover, research funders in the Global North, particularly the United Kingdom, have developed programmes for international research partnerships to support progress towards the UN's SDGs, such as Strategic Partnerships for Higher Education Innovation and Reform (SPHEIR), the Newton Fund, and the Global Challenges Research Fund (GCRF). This has further fuelled the expectation that universities will work with international partners.

> **"There has also been a growing emphasis on societal impact in research, especially since the formalization of the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs). Many international collaborations now focus on tangible societal benefits, such as entrepreneurship support, community engagement, and addressing public health issues."**
>
> HE stakeholder, South Africa

However, working in a partnership does not guarantee equity.

> **"Equity is a big issue. In the past 20 to 30 years, Africa has been worried about the kind of partnerships that we've had, because the partnerships have been lopsided. Most of these partnerships were between the global North and South and [there were] a number of equity issues."**
>
> HE stakeholder, Ghana

> **"There are a lot of inequalities in terms of production and dissemination of knowledge."**
>
> HE stakeholder, South Africa

While partnerships can create considerable opportunities for organisations in the Global South, they are nonetheless complex in terms of the power relations between participants.

> **"Partnerships exist in specific contexts, which drive expectations of how the partnership is formed, and how the partners contribute to and benefit from it. Though often presented as a 'neutral good', the term 'partnership' conceals a tangle of complex power relations. These are embedded in institutional structures and processes; in research practices and identities; in the tools, texts and technologies of research; and in the jargon of development and research policy and funding. These structural, social, material, personal and linguistic influences will determine whose knowledge, skills, agendas and values are prioritised."**
>
> *Rethinking Research Collaborative*[1]

The challenge is not only to reflect on these issues in partnerships, but to take practical steps to ensure that partnerships are fair and provide benefits for all partners.

> **"We have a fair sense of what inhibits equity... We want to look at the elements or attributes that foster equity and vigorously pursue it."**
>
> HE stakeholder, Ghana

Many international higher education partnerships are still led by partners in the Global North and this has created significant power asymmetries. Northern partners have steered decision-making, dominating decisions on research objectives, research design, allocation of budgets, division of labour, and use of data.

> **"Even when it comes to the practical arrangements for the partnerships, sometimes that is also a challenge because most of the things will be done in Northern countries."**
>
> HE stakeholder, Ghana

Often, this has led to Southern partners taking on secondary roles, being tasked primarily with data collection and discrete areas of interpretation based on local knowledge.

> "Avoid the assumption that there are no good brains in Africa. That expertise must always come from other places, and it will be like top down, them coming to tell us what to do. There is a need to have a spirit of co-creating things together."
>
> HE stakeholder, Kenya

This power dynamic has also prevented partners in Africa from accessing the same rewards and benefits.

> "It is essential for my collaborators to appreciate and respect that I bring my own unique insights and expertise to the table. Historically, Africa has been exploited, both economically through the extraction of resources and in research, where data is often collected here but analysed and published elsewhere. I strongly argue that Africans have much to offer in these collaborations."
>
> HE stakeholder, South Africa

> "Partnerships should be true collaborations; not exploitative arrangements where African partners are used for their experiences and knowledge."
>
> HE stakeholder, South Africa

Funding for many international higher education partnerships is derived from international development aid. Historically, this partnership model has been based on the idea that higher education institutions in the Global North support their counterparts in the Global South.[3] This creates a hierarchical supporter-recipient relationship.[4] As one interviewee explained, there are sometimes still echoes of **"...the development frame where Africans are always portrayed as poor living in poverty and always need to be helped."**

The development model also implies that benefits are unidirectional, with knowledge and expertise flowing from the North to the South. Seeking to redress these inequities, funders have placed greater emphasis on "equity" in international partnerships in recent years, particularly in the context of collaborations between Africa and the Global North.

Agendas and concepts linked to decolonisation, such as the challenging of colonial hierarchies and decentring of Western perspectives, have also been a major driver in pushing equitable partnerships up the agenda.[5] The focus on equitable partnerships reflects increased awareness that more work needs to be done to ensure that international partnerships address unequal power dynamics.[6]

Reflecting increased acknowledgement of these issues, government-funded schemes have introduced terminology around equity into their policies and funding programmes for partnerships. For example, the UK's Global Challenges Research Fund (GCRF), which ran from 2015 to 2021, had an aim of promoting "meaningful and equitable relationships between UK research institutions and developing country partners."

[3] Flint, A. G., Howard, G., Baidya, M., Wondim, T., Poudel, M., Nijhawan, A., Sharma, S., & Mulugeta, Y. (2022). Equity in Global North-South Research Partnerships: Interrogating UK funding models. *Global Social Challenges Journal*, 1(1), 76-93. https://doi.org/10.1332/VQIL8302

[4] Shingo Hanada (2021). Higher education partnerships between the Global North and Global South: Mutuality, rather than aid. *Journal of Comparative & International Higher Education*, 13(5), 135-144.

[5] See, for example, Maria Sempere, Talatu Aliyu and Cathy Bollart (2022) Towards Decolonising Research Ethics:

From One-off Review Boards to Decentralised North–South Partnerships in an International Development Programme. Education Sciences, 12(4), article no. 236; Oxfam GB;s Decolonial Partnerships Strategy, https://www.oxfam.org.uk/documents/774/Oxfam-GB-Decolonial-Partnerships-Strategy.pdf

[6] See, for example, Cathy Bollaert (2023) Towards a decolonial ethic for building fair and equitable research partnerships, Development Studies Association, https://www.devstud.org.uk/2023/06/27/towards-a-decolonial-ethic-for-building-fair-and-equitable-research-partnerships ;

In the case of GCRF, a research study examining African partners' perspectives on its funding criteria found that the programme design addressed many of the longstanding concerns of African partners.[7] However, the study also noted that African partners had different priorities and timeframes to their UK counterparts, as well as noting challenges for African HEIs lacking global profiles.

Other funders have also introduced guidelines and requirements that aim to increase equity in partnerships. Approaches adopted range from more light-touch recommendations concerning equity to fixed requirements for partners in the Global South to be included as principle or co-investigators or project leads.

Discussions of equitable partnerships have taken place across numerous conferences, workshops and events, increasing understanding of what equity is and why it matters. Moreover, there is a growing body of literature on equity in research partnerships (discussed in more detail in Section 3.1.1 below). This said, understandings of "equity" in partnerships vary across different contexts.

A 2024 study by Southern Voice, in collaboration with the Institute of Development Studies (IDS) and with the support of the International Development Research Centre (IDRC), found that actors in the Global North often conceptualise equity in different ways to actors in the Global South, placing greater emphasis on relationships themselves rather than the larger systems and agendas affecting partnerships.[8]

> **"My view is that we need to hear what people from the Global South want and not just impose our views on equity."**
>
> HE stakeholder, United Kingdom

The UK Collaborative on Development Research (UKCDR) defines equitable research partnerships as **"partnerships in which there is mutual participation, mutual trust and respect, mutual benefit and equal value placed on each partners contribution at all stages of the research process."**[9] This definition provides a useful starting point for exploration of issues relating to equitable international higher education partnerships.

3.1.1 Research and guidance on equity and sustainability in partnerships

In recent years, a number of organisations have been working to both research and produce guidance on making international partnerships more equitable and sustainable. A list of resources relating to equitable partnerships is included in the accompanying Partnerships Toolkit, but major actors in this space in the UK and their recent publications include the organisations listed in Figure 1 below.

Their recommendations are based on in-depth research and extensive engagement with stakeholders. They aim to create best practice guidelines for HEIs and other organisations, such as NGOs, civil society organisations and research funders. A broad range of research funders (such as FCDO, UKRI, Wellcome, and DFID), higher education institutions and networks (such as African Research Universities Alliance and the Association of African Universities), and NGOs (such as Christian Aid and Action Aid) and campaign groups (such as Africans Rising) have collaborated with these organisations and implemented their recommendations.

---

[7] Tigist Grieve and Rafael Mitchell (2020) Promoting Meaningful and Equitable Relationships? Exploring the UK's Global Challenges Research Fund (GCRF) Funding Criteria from the Perspectives of African Partners, The European Journal of Development Research, 32, 514-528

[8] Andrea Ordóñez Llanos, Peter Taylor, Geetika Khanduja, Erica Nelson and Tracy Mamoun (2024) Envisioning an equitable future for research across the North-South Divide, Southern Voice: http://southernvoice.org/wp-content/uploads/2024/06/240619-SV_Sintaxis-3-V1.1.pdf

[9] https://ukcdr.org.uk/priority-area/equitable-partnerships/

Figure 1: Organisations producing guidance on equitable partnerships

- **The Association of Commonwealth Universities (ACU)**, the world's oldest international university network with over 400 members in 40 countries across the Commonwealth, supports a range of activities relating to international collaboration and capacity strengthening. ACU has developed an Equitable Research Partnerships Toolkit, which builds on in-depth research on equitable partnerships. It comprises practical resources to enable partners to reflect critically and discuss what equity means and to establish or develop equity within research partnerships. The Toolkit aims to address a need for more practical guidance on how to translate principles of equity into actions.

  https://www.acu.ac.uk/news/equitable-research-partnerships-toolkit/

- **The Perivoli Africa Research Centre (PARC)**, which is based at the University of Bristol, works to champion the transformation of research collaborations between the Global North and Africa. PARC supported the co-creation of the Africa Charter, working with a range of actors in the continent, including the Association of African Universities (AAU), African Research Universities Alliance (ARUA), African Academy of Sciences (AAS), CODESRIA and International Network for Higher Education in Africa (INHEA). PARC also supports a range of initiatives that aim to strengthen capacity in Africa and support African research leadership, as well as undertaking academic research on related topics.

  https://www.acu.ac.uk/news/equitable-research-partnerships-toolkit/

- **The UK Collaborative on Development Research (UKCDR)** is an impartial organisation that works with, and is funded by, government departments and other research funders, to increase the impact of the UK's investment in international development research. UKCDR engages with a range of areas linked to equitable and sustainable international partnerships. In 2022, UKCDR and ESSENCE on Health Research published a Good Practice guide Four Approach to Support Equitable Research Partnerships. With ESSENCE, it has also created an Equitable Partnerships Resources Hub, which compiles tools, guidance and resources on ensuring equity in international research partnerships.

  https://ukcdr.org.uk

- **Universities UK International (UUKi)** represents 141 UK universities and works in a range of areas linked to the internationalisation of UK higher education, including transnational education and international research collaboration. In 2024, UUKi published insight pieces briefing members on the importance of equity in research partnerships (in association with UKCDR) and equity in TNE partnerships, which was based on a study conducted by UUKi.

  https://www.universitiesuk.ac.uk/universities-uk-international/insights-and-publications/uuki-insights

- **Rethinking Research Collaborative (RRC)** was an international network of organisations, including research organisations, civil society organisations, international NGOs, training providers, social movements, and funders. They worked together to support more inclusive, relevant international collaborations for development research. The RRC's UKRI-funded project, 'Improving Fair and Equitable Research Partnerships', reviewed and synthesised existing principles for research partnerships. Outputs included a discussion guide and toolkit on Rethinking Research Partnerships, compiled by Christian Aid and the Open University. Christian Aid's Centre for Excellence in Research, Evidence and Learning built on the RRC's research findings to develop guides for implementing principles of equity in partnerships.

  https://rethinkingresearchcollaborative.com

Funders and HEIs from across the world, as well as research organisations, have produced guidelines, codes of conduct and reports on equitable partnerships. Moreover, representative bodies from a range of countries, such as The Guild of European Research-Intensive Universities, have played an active role in sharing and promoting resources on equitable partnerships.

Thanks to the efforts of a range of organisations there is now a substantial and growing body of robust work on equitable international partnerships, which can be consulted and built on. There are also growing calls for funders and partners to ensure they are listening to voices from Africa on these issues.

> "It is a question of taking seriously what has come from the continent. Respecting and taking seriously what has come from the continent. As far as Research collaborations, there has been a framework developed [through the Africa Charter] that has shifted the locus and what collaborations are for and what that equity entails. That has come from the continent. It is Africa-centred."
>
> HE stakeholder, United Kingdom

Research partnerships have received the greatest attention, as can be seen from the above examples. To a large extent, this reflects the tendency for international partnerships to be research-focused.

> "Excellence is primarily measured by research achievements rather than teaching or community impact. Consequently, there's a greater emphasis on collaborative research partnerships rather than joint degree programs or professional staff collaborations. Although community engagement is gaining importance, research remains the dominant factor in defining academic excellence and securing funding."
>
> HE stakeholder, South Africa

While many of the broader concepts and recommendations concerning research partnerships are applicable to other types of international higher education partnerships, there is a significant opportunity to develop thinking around equity and sustainability in relation to education – and, specifically, Transnational Education (TNE) – partnerships, as well as those linked to HE's Third Mission.

This report seeks to offer further insights into the current status of higher education partnerships in Sub-Saharan Africa, using a mixed methods approach. As already noted, it considers a broad range of partnerships, across research, teaching and higher education's third mission. Moreover, it aims to prioritise the voices of HE stakeholders in Ghana, Kenya, Nigeria and South Africa. Nonetheless, significant credit needs to be given to the organisations who have set the agenda in terms of conceptual reflections and practical recommendations around equitable international higher education partnerships.

3.1.2 Building equitable partnerships

Equity in partnerships does not emerge by accident. As already discussed, international partnerships exist in contexts where existing power relations and myriad other factors can exert significant influence over structures and processes. Building equity into partnerships requires active thought and reflection from the inception of the partnership.

> "When it comes to equity in partnerships, much of it hinges on the initial agreement. Ideally, both parties should reach a mutually beneficial understanding before the collaboration begins. However, it's important to acknowledge the reality of power dynamics in these partnerships. In many cases, the entity providing the funding holds significant influence over decision-making."
>
> HE stakeholder, Nigeria

Before discussing the role that partners can play in embedding equity in their partnerships, it is important to acknowledge that **many partnerships are linked to funding opportunities**.

> **"In terms of trying to improve equity, it can start from the donors. They should understand that we have our strengths and own environment and set up their needs based on those parameters."**
>
> HE stakeholder, Kenya

Many funders are based in the Global North and set the priorities for their partnership programmes, which are reflected in the specific requirements of funding calls. Consequently, a major concern is that Northern governments, funders and institutions are currently the most prominent voices in discussions around agenda-setting.

> **"Funders often dictate the focus and direction of research projects based on their interests and priorities. For example, if they are primarily concerned with malaria, even if a partner believes yellow fever is more pressing, the funding will still likely be directed toward malaria research. This dynamic can limit the autonomy of the partner institutions, particularly those in Africa, which often receive a smaller share of the decision-making power and resources."**
>
> HE stakeholder, Nigeria

> **"The research does not serve Africa and the Global South. Institutions often give funds to pursue studies that will meet their needs."**
>
> HE stakeholder, Nigeria

> **"Relying heavily on external funding often limits African universities' ability to set their own research agendas, as funding bodies may impose their own priorities. This dependency can lead to challenges in addressing continent-specific needs and priorities."**
>
> HE stakeholder, South Africa

A 2022 research article by Andrew Flint et al observes that the organisations shaping agendas in North-South partnerships in the UK were strongly guided by priorities of the UK government and UK HEIs. Both the need to ensure ODA-funded projects support the "national interest" and the continued use of language and framing that draws on colonial discourses, creates structural barriers that potentially undercut the government's stated commitment to equitable relationships.

> **"Probably, the only way this could be overcome by the funders is to study the system that is there, the way people are working, the local context, in order to implement projects fitting with the local context."**
>
> HE stakeholder, Kenya

HEIs and researchers in the UK are under considerable pressure to prioritise research that is recognised by the Research Excellence Framework, which can disincentivise certain types of projects which may have considerable value in other contexts.[10]

The availability of funding strongly influences the types of international higher education partnerships that can develop. Moreover, the issue of relevance of partnerships to the African context was highlighted by interviewees, as well as in a number of comments shared via the survey.

---

[10] Flint, A. G., Howard, G., Baidya, M., Wondim, T., Poudel, M., Nijhawan, A., Sharma, S., & Mulugeta, Y. (2022). Equity in Global North-South Research Partnerships: Interrogating UK funding models. Global Social Challenges Journal, 1(1), 76-93. https://doi.org/10.1332/VQIL8302

Many interviewees and survey respondents felt that further progress needs to be made in ensuring that funders engage directly with experts in Africa on what to prioritise. Listening to African voices is fundamental to making the systems level of partnerships more equitable.

> **"We have attained qualifications, like Masters degrees and PhDs, that equip us to contribute significantly to knowledge production. We possess insights and experiences that are unique to our contexts, and these should be leveraged to shape global understanding."**
>
> HE stakeholder, South Africa

> **"Funders have specific interests they want to protect and pursue. The challenge lies in aligning these interests with the needs and priorities of the local partners. Equity in decision-making is crucial, but it remains complex when funding dictates the direction of partnerships."**
>
> HE stakeholder, Nigeria

Interviewees working for funders were generally of the view that they were actively working to adapt their programmes to the needs of countries in Africa, often in consultation with national governments.

> **"Every project that we take to the board has to be assessed based on equity. It could be equity with partners, and even in terms of gender equality or equity between disabled people in the project."**
>
> International funder staff member

However, the more critical perspectives frequently shared by stakeholders in Sub-Saharan Africa suggest that this engagement needs to be more meaningful and visible.

Openness when initiating partnerships

Before initiating a partnership, potential partners in the Global North and African institutions should identify their needs and reflect on whether an international partnership is the best way to achieve their objectives.

A partner from South Africa suggested that **"successful partnerships are based on bottom up collaborations"** and noted that HEIs should avoid developing **"paper partnerships"** without engaging with the people who will do the work.

> **"Simply bringing money to the table and dictating terms is insufficient for achieving meaningful and impactful goals. True partnerships require genuine collaboration, where each party is valued not just as a participant but as a significant contributor to the collective mission."**
>
> HE stakeholder, South Africa

Once a partnership is agreed in principle, partners need to agree on the principles that will guide their partnership.

> **"Having unity of purpose can lead to successful partnerships because both partners mutually agree on a common goal. At the end of the day, some partnerships are not really working because everybody is trying to meet their interests."**
>
> HE stakeholder, Kenya

Honesty concerning needs and capacities is crucial to ensuring that the partnership not only utilises different partners strengths in appropriate ways, but also that any gaps or challenges can be addressed. As several interviewees noted, partners in the Global South are sometimes concerned about disclosing these types of issues, particularly at the start of the partnership.

Based on their experiences of partnerships, interviewees from across Sub-Saharan Africa observed that **African partners need to be more open about their needs at the very beginning of the project.** This is because failing to be open can cause difficulties later in the partnership and erode trust between partners.

> **"I think there is a need for more openness of the needs on the South, for example, and also the interest of parties at the very beginning."**
>
> HE stakeholder, Kenya

At the same time, other stakeholders in Africa expressed the view that **African partners should not devalue their own potential to contribute.**

> **"African scholars should approach partnerships with the understanding that they have valuable knowledge and expertise to offer, not just to learn from their Global North counterparts."**
>
> HE stakeholder, South Africa

> **"It's important to approach these collaborations not just with the intention of learning, but also by contributing your own experiences and insights. Bring the unique perspectives of your country and institution into these partnerships. While you learn from others, they can also learn from you."**
>
> HE stakeholder, South Africa

Another stakeholder in South Africa also suggested that **African scholars need to change their mindsets around their role in partnerships, by being confident to take ownership of key tasks.**

> **"We need a change in mindset that empowers our people to believe in themselves."**
>
> HE stakeholder, South Africa

In our survey of HE stakeholders, 85% of respondents (n=70) agreed or strongly agreed that partners had been clear about their motivations and needs. As Figure 2 shows, only a small proportion of respondents said that partners had not been clear about their motivations. These respondents were all involved in partnerships led by an organisation in the Global North.

Figure 2: Were all partners clear about their motivations and needs? (by leadership type) (n=70)
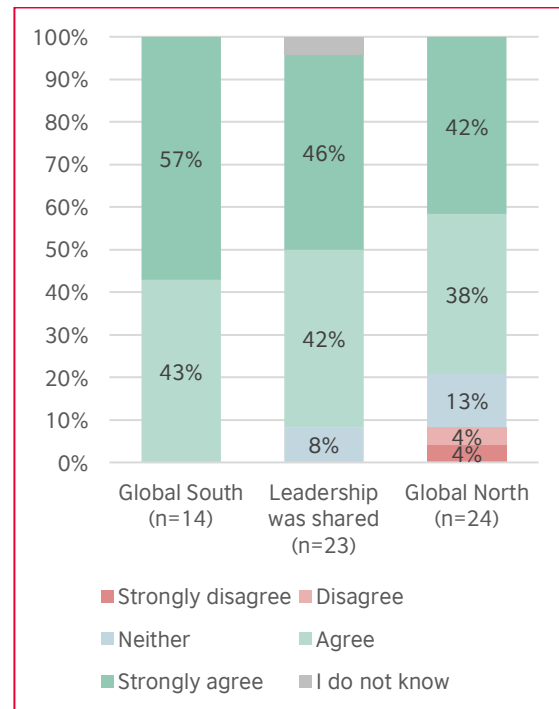
Source: Technopolis, survey results

> **"Institutions have to define clearly from the start what the objectives or the goal of the partnerships are. So once there's a clear definition of what you want to achieve, for the institution, for the researchers, for the students, then that will drive you to work towards those goals."**
>
> HE stakeholder, Nigeria

> **"Agreement is key before even mentioning the issue of equity. The agreement needs an MoU binding all the partners."**
>
> HE stakeholder, Nigeria

A number of our interviewees and survey respondents and interviewees agreed that **a Memorandum of Understanding (MoU) can help clarify and document the goals of the agreement, rights and responsibilities of partners and other aspects of the partnership.**

> **"Typically, we operate under a Memorandum of Understanding (MOU) or a similar agreement that lays out the process clearly. This document serves as the guiding framework for establishing and managing the partnership. It's essential to view this as a process, not a one-off arrangement."**
>
> HE stakeholder, Nigeria

Less formal Partnership Agreements can also help to clarify the shared vision and values of the partnership.

> **"The partnership agreement should emphasise the need for equity"**
>
> HE stakeholder, Nigeria

> **"Respect for the principles of equity was embedded in the partnership (mutual respect, inclusivity, keeping to the rules of expertise, knowledge sharing and collaboration). These rules were strictly followed, as all the partners addressed all kind of power imbalances from inception."**
>
> HE stakeholder, Nigeria

Various templates for Partnership Agreements exist online, including in the ACU Equitable Research Partnerships Tool.[11] range of stakeholders emphasised that these types of agreements should be responsive and treated as living documents, that can evolve with the partnership.

Involving African organisations in agenda setting

> **"In terms of who takes the lead on the project, African HEIs are always tagging along. They are not the ones leading, nor formulating the ideas. These are equity issues."**
>
> HE stakeholder, Ghana

To ensure equity from the outset, all partners should be involved on setting the agenda for the partnership. Agreeing the agenda should be part of a wider practice of co-creation, through which partners share power and decision-making in order to shape priorities and design activities. This encourages all partners to reach a mutual understanding about different aspects of the partnership and promotes a sense of shared ownership.

> **"For true equity and mutual benefit, it is essential to ensure that the perspectives and needs of all partners are considered in the decision-making process."**
>
> HE stakeholder, Nigeria

Where partnerships are based around the implementation of activities in countries in Africa, the African partner should play a central role in identifying the aims and priorities of the partnership.

> **"This approach is critical because it allows researchers to draw from their own contexts, bringing unique perspectives that external researchers may lack. By involving scholars from their own countries in these research projects, we empower them to contribute authentically."**
>
> HE stakeholder, South Africa

---

[11] https://www.acu.ac.uk/our-work/projects-and-programmes/equitable-research-partnerships-toolkit/erpt-2024-section-4/?ref=Link

The majority of respondents to our survey agreed (48%) or strongly agreed (39%) that partners had opportunities to set the agenda for their partnerships, with only 5.6% disagreeing or strongly disagreeing (n=71). Across the four focus countries, one respondent in Kenya (representing 6% of responses from Kenya) and three respondents from Nigeria (representing 15% of responses from Nigeria) indicated they disagreed or strongly disagreed that they had chances to set the agenda.

There were a range of comments from both interviewees and survey respondents concerning **the importance of co-creation, inclusion and involvement of partners from the Global South in project/programme conceptualisation.**

> **"There should be more opportunities where Global South partners are conceptualising and leading the proposals, instead of just assisting Global North partners. This allows the proposals developed to be relevant to the Global South context."**
>
> HE stakeholder, South Africa

However, as one stakeholder pointed out, African scholars can struggle to be involved in proposal development.

> **"Joint grant writing doesn't happen that often due to lack of capacity."**
>
> HE stakeholder, Ghana

As well as demanding that partners in Africa had a voice, survey respondents also indicated that **African organisations should be allowed to "lead in projects targeting African solutions and being implemented in Africa".**

Survey respondents also discussed the importance of supporting development goals via partnerships. One respondent stated that there was a need **"to specifically develop and fund higher education research projects with a focus on solving regional development challenges".**

> **"Those who respond to calls for collaboration should be expected to give back to the communities where projects are implemented. They should actively involve local people, ensuring that the benefits of the partnership extend to the grassroots level."**
>
> HE stakeholder, South Africa

Ensuring that partnerships target a variety of geographical regions was a key concern of another respondent from Nigeria, who stated **"There should be more priority to rural areas."**

The consensus across many respondents was that African partners are best-placed to identify priorities that would be beneficial to their specific countries and regions.

Fair allocation of roles and responsibilities

Equitable partnerships are characterised by cooperation between partners throughout the partnership. Several interviewees and survey respondents stated the importance of a clear allocation of roles and sharing of responsibility, which reflects an appreciation of the expertise that each partner brings to the table.

> **"The design has to take into account the capabilities of the different partners and also the responsibilities and find out whether those partners have the capacity to handle those responsibilities or not."**
>
> HE stakeholder, Kenya

> **"Both partners share these responsibilities, with specific assignments distributed accordingly. This collaborative approach ensures that each institution actively participates and contributes, rather than one institution shouldering the entire burden. This shared responsibility model is crucial for successful and sustainable partnerships."**
>
> HE stakeholder, Nigeria

This should be supported by ongoing communication between partners and a responsive approach, which enables partnerships to adapt to changing circumstances.

> "Meeting regularly, but even in those meetings, really speaking out, when things are not going well, if somebody feels overwhelmed. Make suggestions to change something, having open and honest conversations with each other and people really being genuinely interested in creating a win-win. If you have a situation where somebody is not interested in creating the win-win, then one party will always feel like they are not valued, or their voice does not matter."
>
> HE stakeholder, Kenya

Satisfaction with cooperation among partners was generally high amongst our survey respondents.

However, as can be seen in Figure 3, higher levels of dissatisfaction were reported by partners where the partnership was led by an organisation in the Global North and where leadership was shared. Although the sample size was smaller, none of the respondents involved in partnerships led by an organisation in the Global South expressed dissatisfaction with cooperation amongst partners.

Figure 3: Partners' satisfaction with cooperation, by leadership
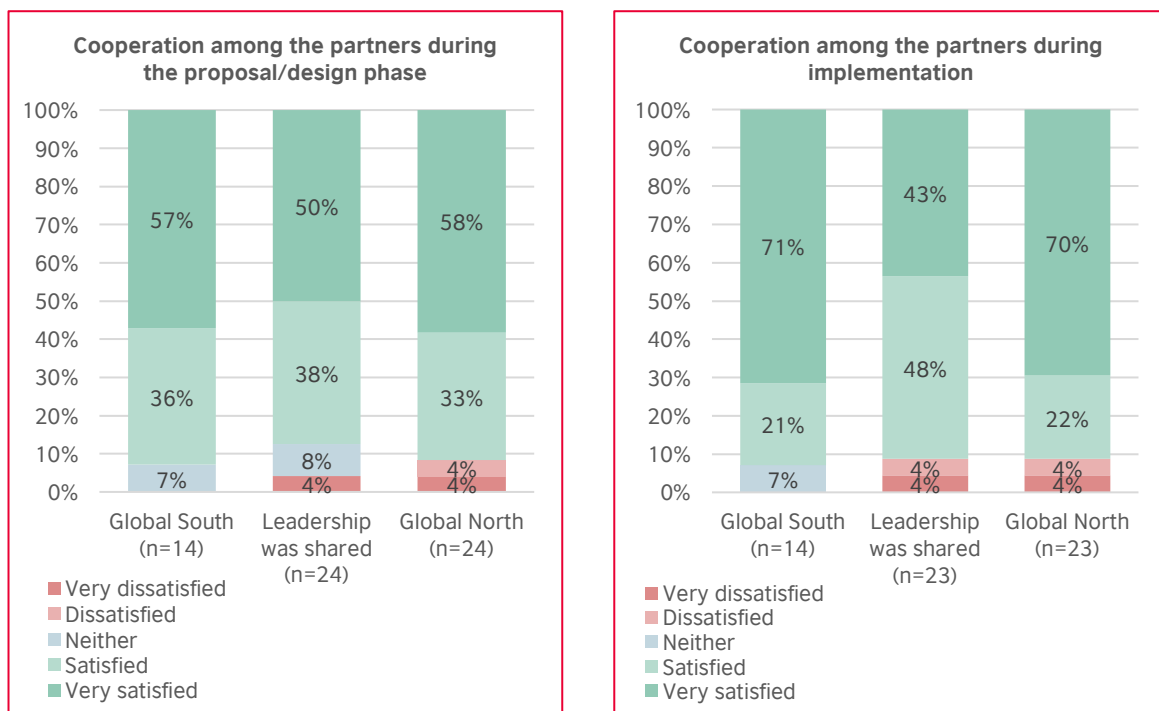
Source: Technopolis, survey results

To maintain equity, all partners need to sustain their engagement in the activities of partnership and, as far as possible, meet their agreed responsibilities. A lack of engagement by individual partners can create significant challenges for a partnership.

> **"We have consistently strived to maintain credibility and build trust from the outset. Establishing this credibility from day one has proven to be immensely beneficial."**
>
> HE stakeholder, Nigeria

In our survey, 12.5% of respondents (n=64) indicated they had encountered a lack of support/interest from their partners. While the survey data does not provide the context for this issue, several interviewees observed that COVID had created challenges around the engagement of partners and progression of activities. One interviewee from Ghana also reported that at least one partnership involving their HEI has failed due to challenges created by COVID.

The majority of survey respondents (91%, n=60) were satisfied with the coordination by the lead partner, as shown in Figure 4. The sharing of responsibility amongst partners appears to have been slightly more challenging in partnerships when leadership was shared (Figure 4). However, 87% of survey respondents (n=60), were satisfied or strongly satisfied with the sharing of responsibility among the partners.

Figure 4: Partners' satisfaction with coordination and sharing of responsibility across partners (by lead partner) (n=60)
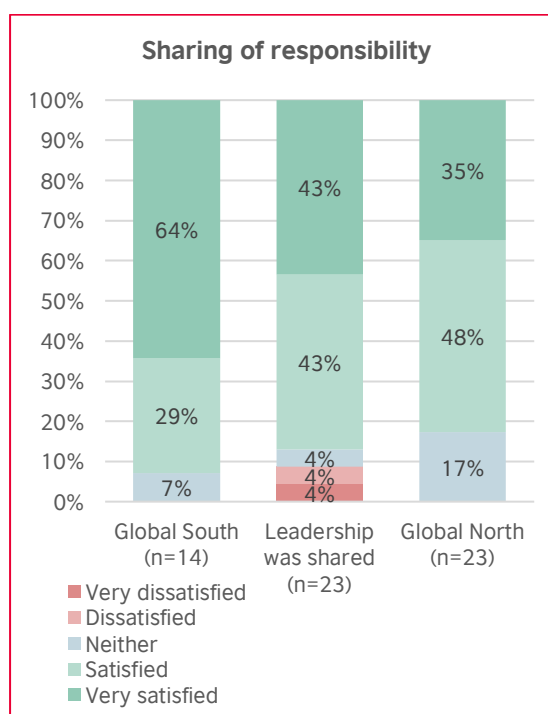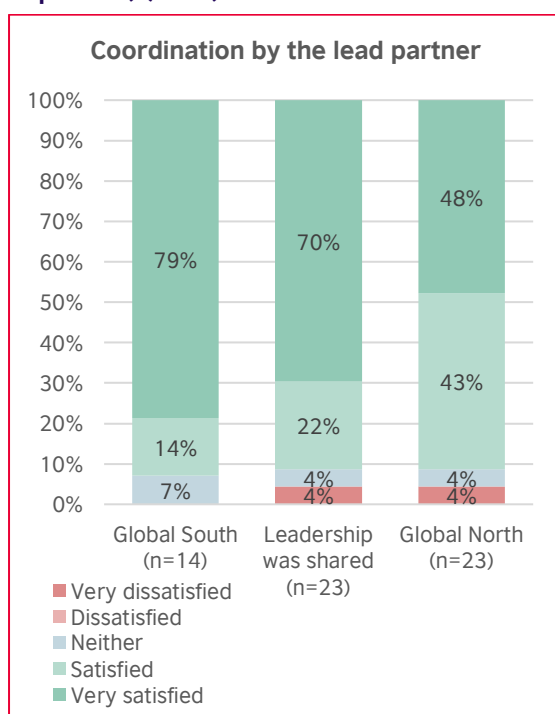
Source: Technopolis, survey results

The levels of satisfaction reported in the survey do not necessarily mean that stakeholders wish for the status quo to remain. There were a range of comments from HE stakeholders, shared via the survey, that indicated **desire by African organisations to be given more opportunities to lead partnerships and to take on roles that would provide opportunities to enhance their capacity**.

Areas of capacity building mentioned included experience of leadership, supporting relationship management, exchange opportunities for staff and students, the development of sustainable delivery models, as well as investment in facilities.

Lead partners should also take responsibility for ensuring the other partners are aware of opportunities related to the funder and encouraged to engage with them. In our survey, 17% of all respondents (n=69) disagreed or strongly disagreed that they had equal access to the funder and the activities it delivers. As can be seen in Figure 5, partners in Ghana, Kenya and Nigeria reported challenges in this area. Funders have a role to play in ensuring that all partners can access opportunities and activities provided through the programme.

Figure 5: Partners' satisfaction with access to the funder and activities it delivers
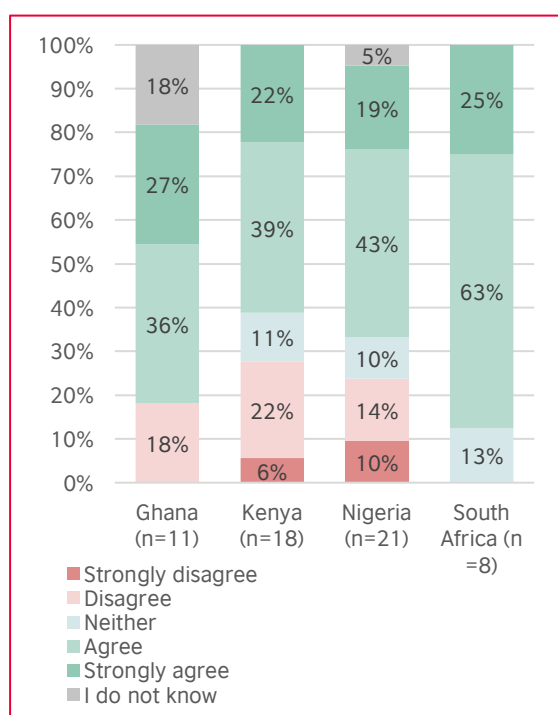
Source: Technopolis, survey results

3.1.3   Other drivers of equity in partnerships

The majority of survey respondents reported that they were satisfied with overall equity in their partnerships(s). Across all respondents (n=69), 48% were satisfied and 39% were very satisfied, with just 4% of respondents expressing dissatisfaction. Based on their experiences, they identified a range of factors that had helped increase equity in partnerships. Interviewees discussed a variety of drivers of equity in partnerships. These perspectives collected from stakeholders help

to illuminate previous work that examines key drivers of equity in partnerships.

Respect, trust and valuing expertise

In their survey responses, **partners across a range of countries identified honesty, transparency, trust and mutual respect as key features of equitable partnerships**. Open and honest communication was seen by many stakeholders as crucial to helping ensure partnerships are successful.

> **"Creating a space within partnerships where all voices can be heard equitably is crucial. This allows for open discussions about each partner's unique contexts right from the start, promoting mutual understanding and ensuring that African knowledge, context, and research priorities are properly considered and respected in collaborative efforts."**
>
> HE stakeholder, South Africa

Valuing what all partners can bring to the table is also another major driver of equity. In the past, however, the assumption that researchers from the Global North possess more valuable expertise and knowledge than those from the Global South has fuelled significant inequity in partnerships. This issue was discussed in both the literature and in stakeholder interviews.

The devaluation of indigenous knowledge and the theories and concepts used by African scholars has led to misunderstandings and underestimations of the expertise held in the Global South. Several recent initiatives, most prominently the Africa Charter, seek to address this imbalance.[12]

> **"Most of our partnerships with international organisations, they use Western centric epistemologies. Ways of knowing and issues about indigenous knowledge have not been really addressed the way they ought to be addressed."**
>
> HE stakeholder, Ghana

---

[12] https://parc.bristol.ac.uk/africa-charter/

Overall, our survey respondents felt that their organisation's expertise was valued by their partners, with 88% of all respondents (n=70) agreeing or strongly agreeing. Only 3% of respondents (2 out of 70) disagreed or strongly disagreed that their organisation's expertise was valued. As can be seen in Figure 6 below, 6% of respondents in Kenya and 5% of respondents in Nigeria felt their expertise was not valued. These respondents had participated in partnerships led by partners in the Global North. The survey results for trust in partnerships reflected a similar trend, with **90% of respondents (n=70) agreeing or strongly agreeing that they felt trusted as a partner** and a small proportion of respondents in Kenya and Nigeria strongly disagreeing.

Figure 6: Valuation of partners' expertise and trust, by focus country (n=58)[13]
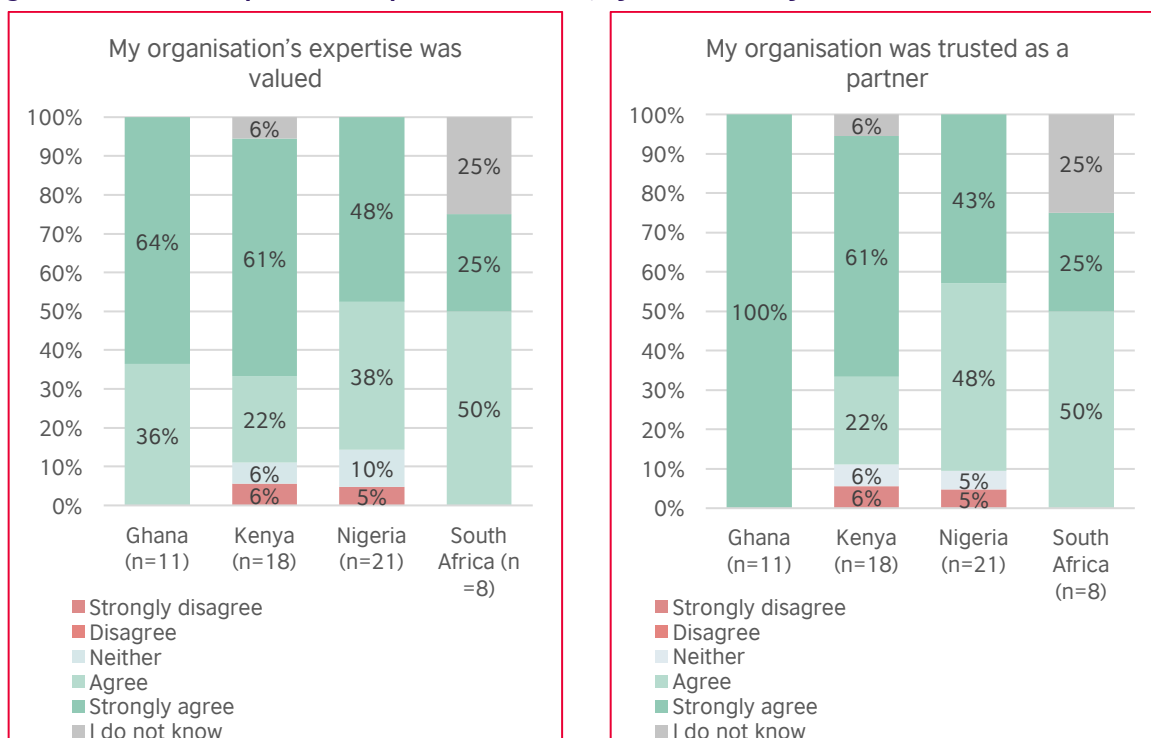
Source: Technopolis, survey results

Understanding of partners' contexts

In an equitable partnership, all partners need to understand the contexts in which each partner works and, thus, build realistic expectations of what partners can deliver.

> **"Lack of resources, including financial and knowledge resources, hinders meaningful partnerships between African and Global North institutions."**
>
> HE stakeholder, South Africa

> **"There are challenges in terms of funding, human resources capacities to manage the partnerships. There is an issue of workload of the staff in academic setting. There is a need to actually build capacity and employ people to actually do some of this."**
>
> HE stakeholder, Nigeria

In particular, it is important to have an understanding of institutional capacity, as this can have a significant impact on the ability to fulfil roles and deliver within set timescales.

---

[13] Chart data excludes survey respondents from countries other than Ghana, Kenya, Nigeria and South Africa

As discussed in the Country Profiles (Annex to this report), African HEIs can struggle with a range of issues, including overstretched academic staff, limited administrative capacity and poor infrastructure (such as IT, library resources and specialist facilities).

Partners on all sides of the partnership also need to be mindful of differences in cultures and professional norms.

> **"The issue is not so much about whether African contexts and knowledge are valued but rather about awareness and understanding. Partners from the Global North often lack awareness of the specific contexts African researchers deal with, such as indigenous knowledge systems and the broader debate around decolonizing the curriculum.**
>
> **This lack of awareness underscores the importance of sensitization and education for Global North partners about these contexts. Global North partners need to take responsibility for learning about these contextual differences. At the same time, African partners should proactively outline their specific contexts and challenges to ensure that their perspectives are understood and valued."**
>
> HE stakeholder, South Africa

The majority of respondents to our survey agreed or strongly agreed that the other partners understood their cultural and working environment. However, 22% of respondents in Kenya and 10% of respondents in Nigeria disagreed or strongly disagreed.

There were also comments on the survey that indicated there needs to be **"more understanding of the cultural and social peculiarities"** of countries and that partners should **"increase understanding of partner countries systems and environments"** in order to improve equity and sustainability. This suggests that there is still room for improvement to this aspect of partnerships.

Figure 7: Satisfaction with other partners' understanding of their cultural and working environment, by country
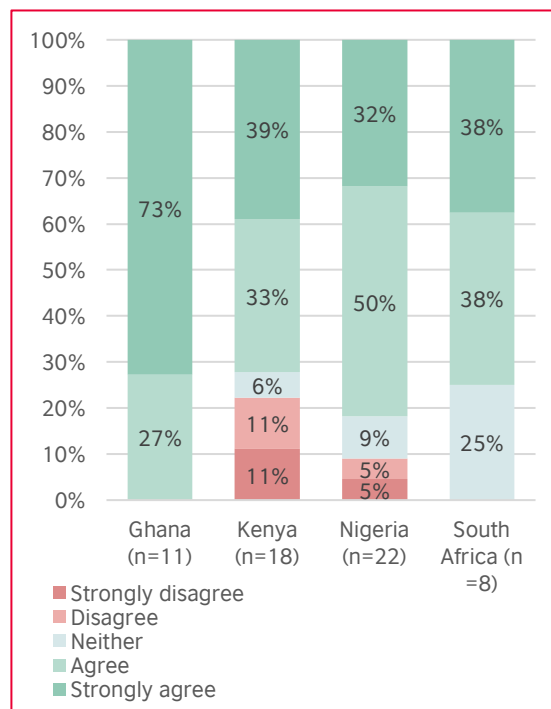
Source: Technopolis, survey results

3.1.4   Mutual Benefit in partnerships

Equitable international partnerships will provide benefits for all partners. Achieving mutual benefit requires partners to pay greater attention to the specific needs and wants of all partners.

> **"In terms of success factors, the crucial ones would be win-win partnerships. They have to really make sense to everybody. We need to avoid top-down sort of projects that appear to just want to focus on a certain area that maybe the partner outside wants, but the local partners do not find it a priority."**
>
> HE stakeholder, Kenya

> **"Ensure that even if one of the partners is weak, the partnership is still of mutual benefit."**
>
> HE stakeholder, Ghana

In terms of the setup of projects, roles and responsibilities need to be shared in ways that maximise benefits to all partners, paying particular attention to capacity strengthening.

> "50/50 is impossible to achieve in these international partnerships. The global best practice that would help in the partnership is a practise that ensures empowerment of the perceived weak."
>
> HE stakeholder, Nigeria

Partners have an obligation to be transparent about their motivations and clear about who will receive what benefits. As already discussed in Section 3.1.2, discussion of these issues should start at the beginning of the partnership.

Overall, there is a strong recognition amongst African stakeholders of the potential benefits of partnerships and an appetite to continue working with international partners. However, interviewees reported mixed experiences when it came to the benefits of partnerships.

Having equal access to potential benefits was seen by many stakeholders as an indicator of an equitable partnership. For example, African partners in research projects reported varied experiences on whether they were involved in the development of publications and dissemination activities based on their research.

> "If research is conducted by an African University, the outputs become owned by the institution or by the country where the funds are coming from."
>
> HE stakeholder, Kenya

> "Issues of authorship also need to be addressed. In some projects, there have been disputes over the order of authors' names, with colleagues from the Global North often assuming precedence. Such situations demand assertiveness to redress asymmetries and ensure that African scholars receive the recognition they deserve."
>
> HE stakeholder, South Africa

This finding is consistent with recent analyses of academic authorship, which have found that authorship remains skewed towards partners in the Global North.[14]

For academics, inclusion as authors on publications was still seen as one of the key benefits for them personally.

> "Seeing their names published in book chapters or journal articles validates their work and boosts researchers' confidence. We need to adopt this method when working with counterparts from the Global North to ensure equitable collaboration."
>
> HE stakeholder, South Africa

> "The global reputation of your scientific knowledge output is directly proportional to collaboration with between this the Global South and the Global North. And one of the things that we generally use in measuring the potential in the scientific world is citations. Though it may not be a perfect measurement of reputation, but…if we do a personal assessment, we will see that some of the publications that we co-authored with people from other clients, from other countries especially, [we see higher citations]."
>
> HE stakeholder, Nigeria

---

[14] Sarah Hanka (2024) Equitable Partnerships – Learning Brief, *NIHR Open Research*, https://openresearch.nihr.ac.uk/documents/4-60

For researchers in both the Global North and Global South, high-impact publishing creates significant career opportunities. Partners in the Global South should, therefore, be involved in the production of academic outputs and the dissemination of findings. Authorship needs to be cultivated on all sides of the relationship, in a way that does not foster dependency, but instead in a way that is mutually supportive and develops researchers' knowledge of the publication process.

Some interviewees in Sub-Saharan Africa felt that there were wider issues caused by their Northern partners playing a leading role in defining beneficial aspects of the partnership, leading to missed opportunities for their HEI and/or community. This reinforces the need for partners to ensure that their visions and priorities are aligned.

3.1.5 Challenges and barriers in partnerships

Interviewees reported a range of challenges that they had encountered in the implementation of partnerships, as well as ways to address immediate and underlying issues. Similarly, while our survey respondents were generally satisfied with equity in their partnerships, many of them acknowledged that they nonetheless encountered barriers and challenges.

Funding arrangements and financial challenges

HE stakeholders in Sub-Saharan Africa frequently commented that equity was linked to funding arrangements. Several interviewees and survey respondents stated that **African organisations should be entrusted with funding more often than they are at present**.

> **"The African partners are very strained in terms of implementation because they have to implement things under very tight budgets and tight donor conditions. So, some of the things that sometimes make partnerships are kind of seem unequal."**
>
> HE stakeholder, Kenya

> **"Institutions in Africa, speaking from an African perspective, need to be trusted more and go to a level where they can be trusted with resources that they can account for. Some may have misappropriated some funds, so controls are good, but where an institution has proven itself that it can be trusted, then it should be trusted with those resources."**
>
> HE stakeholder, Kenya

This points to a larger concern, expressed by many stakeholders, around the power imbalances created by partners in the Global North having control of budgets and the disbursement of funds.

> **"Fundings are in line with the budget submitted by the university. Donors generally give the funds to some other institutions in the North to control. Donors maybe don't trust the institutions here in Africa that they have the capacity to manage the grants, so it has to be managed by an institution in their countries. Some of the reasons would be legal, that there has to be somebody they will hold to account. A large amount of the budgets ends up going to those institutions as opposed to coming to the local institutions."**
>
> HE stakeholder, Kenya

> **"Equity depends on the person who drafts the budget for activity. If this person is fair, then there are more chances to have equity. Equity also depends on the capacities and expertise of partners. Still some partnerships are not equitable."**
>
> HE stakeholder, Ghana

The funders we interviewed were mindful of these power imbalances, and, in principle, in favour of more opportunities for institutions in Africa to control budgets, provided that African partners could meet the understandably stringent requirements set by their funding organisations. However, they noted that some African institutions struggled to provide sufficient evidence of legal and financial compliance for funders to sign off on contracts.

> **"It varies with the funding bodies. Especially the European ones, what they want is to have a someone from there to manage the funds. They want to use people that they trust and people that they can easily communicate with and easily make them accountable."**
>
> HE stakeholder, South Africa

Interviewees in Africa agreed that it was often difficult for their institutions to meet the conditions imposed by funding agencies and this created barriers to participation in partnerships.

> **"It is difficult to meet the conditions of funding agencies... You need to have a good research office at the HEI."**
>
> HE stakeholder, Ghana

> **"Funding for research and partnerships often comes with complex issues, particularly when sourced from external entities like the US State Department or other international bodies. These funding sources have specific requirements that may not align with the local context in Africa, which can complicate the collaboration process."**
>
> HE stakeholder, South Africa

One interviewee who worked for a funder suggested that funders and HEIs in the Global North may need to develop specific recommendations for how African HEIs can work to address these issues. They also suggested that **funders may need to review their approach to risk, if they want to open up opportunities for African partners to lead projects.** This perspective is shared by UKCDR, which recommends that funders rethink their due diligence processes, with input from in-country stakeholders, and improve their understanding of accounting and administrative capacity.

> **"The robust due diligence can be problematic in terms of wanting grants to be led by Southern Partners. In reality, it comes down to funders' risk appetite. There is a discussion to be had around taking risk and acting in a way the is consistent with what funders are saying about equity... They need to be prepared to take some risks and build in the support that goes alongside that to understand and meet requirements."**
>
> International funder staff member

Other interviewees from funders in the Global North suggested that there may also be ways for partners to mitigate the power imbalances created, by reflecting carefully on the setup of the other elements of the partnership. For example, while an HEI in the UK might initially receive and control the funds, the African partner leads the project, setting the agenda and overseeing the budget.

On a more practical level, the calculation of budgets and restrictions on what grant money can be used for were also reported to affect equity. Many stakeholders commented that funds should be adequate to cover all joint activities, as partners often have to make up shortfalls. This issue was seen as originating from funders.

> "Funders want to show money is spent on the activities, not for things like administrative costs. It is seen as negative to invest on administrative side. However, it is important for funders to consider. If you want more equitable relationship, you have to build that into the grants. Southern partners can't always absorb the costs."
>
> International funder staff member

Other stakeholders, in both Africa and the Global North, suggested that African institutions needed additional funding to address gaps in their infrastructure and capacity, thereby improving their ability to contribute the partnership. However, they noted that funders restrictions on spending often prevented expenditure in certain areas.

> "Donors need to insist on more resources going to institutions in the Global South. In many cases, most of the resources end up going back to persons in the Global North by way of staff remuneration. More and more partnerships need to allow purchase of tools, equipment and devices for partners in the Global South. In many cases such expenses are not admissible, yet they contribute to programmatic outcomes. There is need for enhanced capacity of project managers across the board to ensure projects are conceptualised, designed, and managed in a manner that ensures equity, sustainability, and impact."
>
> HE stakeholder, Nigeria

Stakeholders in Africa reported that bureaucracy around the processing of payment can delay partnership activities. While stakeholders understood the reasons behind bureaucratic challenges, they nonetheless felt there needed to be greater understanding of the impact that this can have on project timelines. In recent times, volatile exchange rates on currency have also created budget shortfalls.

> "The only challenge is the bureaucracy. For example, when you ask for funds, it has to go through so many checks and balances before even the funds are released, and that bureaucracy can really delay the activities of the project. But it is a good thing because it makes sure that what you are requesting for is also well known in the university systems, because we there had cases where individuals are able to withdraw money for whatever reason and that's not a good practice."
>
> HE stakeholder, Kenya

> "One of the main challenges is dealing with foreign currency. When you get money and it's changing to your local currency and you are going to transfer it to another country, you lose it which is not fair."
>
> HE stakeholder, Kenya

Other stakeholders reported bureaucratic challenges arising from differences in the administrate setup of African HEIs and different practices in areas such as ethical review procedures.

> "Ethical clearance procedures mandated by funders often do not fit African contexts, creating bureaucratic hurdles."
>
> HE stakeholder, South Africa

Survey respondents in the four focus countries reported that lack of financial resources was the most commonly encountered challenge during partnerships, along with a lack of time (which is linked to wider financial and capacity issues) (Figure 8).

> **"Another challenge we face is related to the economic constraints many institutions are experiencing. Financial resources for partnerships are not as abundant as they once were due to increased humanitarian crises and other global pressures. Many institutions are struggling with budget management, which in turn affects their ability to engage in partnerships. These financial pressures have limited the expansion of collaborative opportunities, even though we continue to pursue them despite these challenges."**
>
> HE stakeholder, Nigeria

Interviewees and survey respondents, located in Africa and in the Global North, stated that more resources should be allocated to partners in the Global South and that funding was needed to address gaps, including access to research materials and publications.

> **"At local level, there are so many challenges. One is financial. Most of the finances are not within the country and the money that is allocated for research is usually a little bit or none at all."**
>
> HE stakeholder, Kenya

Figure 8: Challenges encountered that relate to national and institutional contexts
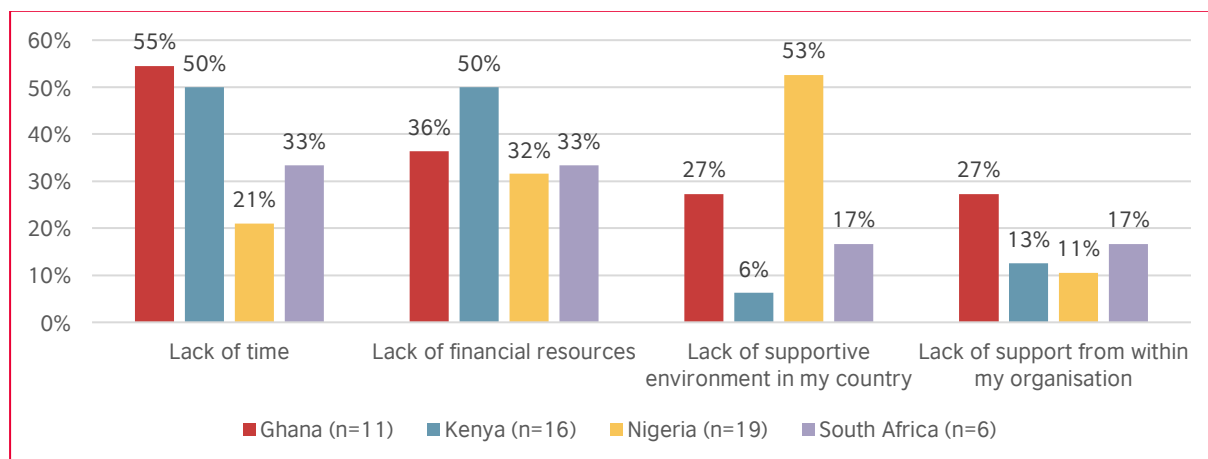
Source: Technopolis, survey results

Challenges related to national and institutional contexts

A significant proportion of survey respondents faced additional challenges related to their national and institutional contexts (Figure 8). Over half (53%) of respondents in Nigeria reported challenges due to a lack of a supportive environment in their country (for example, the political or economic situation in their country makes it more difficult for partnerships).

> **"International partnerships are very much underutilised by Nigeria and by other African institutions… There's no policy direction on international partnerships."**
>
> HE stakeholder, Nigeria

27% of survey respondents from Ghana also reported they experienced challenges due to a lack of support environment in their country.

> **"Remember that on the continent there are lot of development challenges and all of them are competing for attention from the government. So the government will then have to weigh whether giving you the resources is more important than building a clinic in a community, for example."**
>
> HE stakeholder, Ghana

Moreover, 27% of the respondents from Ghana and 17 % of respondents from South Africa reported that they experienced challenges due to lack of support from within their organisations.

> **"Institutional leadership has to be involved in the project if the leadership is not involved or not aware of what is happening then the project may just die very quickly."**
>
> HE stakeholder, Kenya

The Country Profiles (shared as Annex to this report) provide further context for why partners in these countries face particular challenges in these areas.

While partners in the UK reported fewer issues concerning support from within their organisation and the environment in their country in our survey, 100% said that a lack of time and 85% (n=7) said that a lack of financial resources were challenges during their partnerships. While expectations of partners in the UK may differ from their counterparts in the Global South, higher education in the UK is nonetheless experiencing challenges related to staff workloads and institutional finances.

These issues in UK HE were acknowledged in interviews with funders and stakeholders in the UK, but were not seen as a significant barrier. One interviewee suggested that UK HEIs would likely adjust their budgets to account for financial pressures. If this were the case, it would be important to consider the impact this has on budget allocations within partnerships, to ensure that African partners do not lose out, especially given that another interviewee reported that HEIs in Africa tend to underestimate their own costs.

Cultural and language barriers

When working in a cross-cultural context, cultural and language barriers can create challenges for effective communication. In turn, these communication issues can have a negative impact on the activities of the partnership and the relationship between partners. In our survey, 22% of all respondents (n=64) reported that they faced cultural and/or language barriers during their partnership (Figure 9). Although some caution is needed, based on the small sample size, it appears that cultural and language barriers were a more common challenge for individuals based in the UK than their counterparts in Sub-Saharan Africa.

Figure 9: Percentage of survey respondents who encountered cultural and language barriers

Ghana (n=11)	27%
Kenya (n=16)	13%
Nigeria (n=19)	16%
South Africa (n=6)	33%
United Kingdom (n=7)	43%
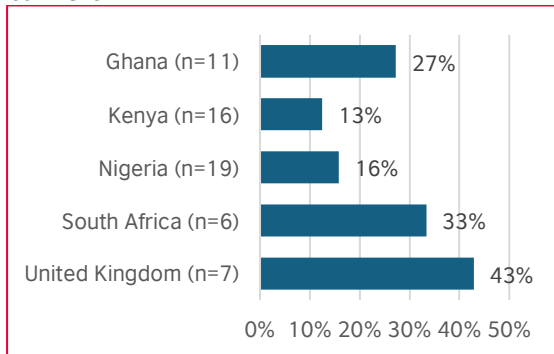
Source: Technopolis, survey results

On a practical level, partners need to agree on working procedures that can accommodate cultural and linguistic differences. While language barriers may not always be straightforward to address, at the very least, partners can agree a consistent approach to the working language used in the partnership. For example, one interviewee reported that unnecessary challenges were created by their partners in the Netherlands sending emails in Dutch, rather than English. This kind of issue should be straightforward to avoid.

Cultural perceptions and stereotypes concerning not only Africa as a continent, but also specific countries, were remarked on by several interviewees and linked to issues of trust.

> **"A significant issue in building partnerships is the trust deficit, often rooted in racial perceptions. Being a black person in a predominantly white setting can lead to a lack of trust. This issue is further complicated by Nigeria's image, which carries certain stereotypes, even within West Africa. These stereotypes often surface immediately in interactions."**
>
> HE stakeholder, Nigeria

Rather than making assumptions, partners (whether from the Global North or Global South) need to learn about the partner country's culture and promoting open communication.

> **"In any situation, agreement on the terms, tolerance, cultural sensitivity and respect are key."**
>
> HE stakeholder, Nigeria

Ideally, opportunities should be provided for this learning to take place within the context of the partnership. The ACU's Equitable Research Partnerships Toolkit, for example, provides examples of activities that can help partners better understand their contexts and challenge assumptions.[15] Both funders and stakeholders commented that in-person interactions, taking place in-country, were particularly beneficial in building greater understanding.

---

[15] https://www.acu.ac.uk/our-work/projects-and-programmes/equitable-research-partnerships-toolkit/

Barriers to the creation of partnerships

The external environment creates significant barriers to the creation of partnerships. Of the survey respondents who had not been involved in international partnerships, the most frequently encountered barriers were finding international partners and identifying suitable partnership programmes (**Error! Reference source not found.**).

Interviewees also noted it could be difficult to identify suitable partners. They also noted that lack of administrative capacity and established networks were a barrier.

> **"It is difficult to get the partners. There is difficulty in finding partners that align with the institution's mission and vision... The challenge of finding and developing partnerships with institutions from the Global North."**
>
> HE stakeholder, Kenya

> **"We lost a horizon Europe grant, due to lack of partners in some countries. Having partners is a challenge. There is no dedicated staff working on the collaboration; the university is also lacking a strong network."**
>
> HE stakeholder, Nigeria

These challenges were echoed in qualitative survey responses. As one respondent from Zambia noted, "People need to be aware of such opportunities, procedures, terms, as well as conditions." Another respondent, from Ghana, suggested that funders should make more of an effort to share opportunities with potential beneficiaries.

Figure 10: Barriers to involvement in international partnerships

Source: Technopolis, survey results

Several interviewees observed that there is a tendency for both funders and HEIs in the Global North to rely on African partners who have already worked on successful partnership projects, which can limit access to opportunities.

> **"Typically, the research-intensive universities dominate the rankings and international collaborations, while other institutions, including previously disadvantaged universities and TVET colleges, have less exposure and fewer opportunities for global partnerships."**
>
> HE stakeholder, South Africa

> **"Certain universities get these grants frequently and have the systems and administrative capacity required. Certain institutions much less experienced and can't evidence the requirements. Even just reading Terms of Reference and understanding the requirements is a challenge."**
>
> International funder staff member

In response to this issue, UKCDR has recommended that **funders ensure that they actively engage HEIs and organisations in Africa who have not previously participated in partnerships, prior to funding calls, to improve understanding of opportunities**. [16]

Funders should also ensure they provide sufficient time for partners to identify each other and reflect on how they can facilitate connections between potential partners.

3.1.6 Conclusions on equity in partnerships

Making international partnerships more equitable is strongly supported by all stakeholders. Our research shows that there are several ways in which partners are embedding equity into partnerships involving partners in Sub-Saharan Africa, suggesting that progress is being made. In turn, this indicates that the wider debate and increased guidance on equity is starting to have an impact. With regards to drivers of equity, key themes in the interviews and survey responses include:

- Openness and honesty when initiating partnerships

- Involving African organisations in agenda setting

- Fair allocation of roles and responsibilities

- Respect, trust and valuing expertise

- Understanding of partners' contexts

These themes align with findings in the wider body of literature and guidance on equitable partnerships.

Many stakeholders agreed that they faced barriers to achieving equity. They also reported that they encountered challenges that affected their participation in partnerships more generally.

Stakeholders identified areas where improvements could be made. Furthermore, several interviewees reported that they had been involved in partnerships that were not equitable and identified some of the issues they encountered. Again, the major themes identified in this study – such as cultural and language barriers, difficulties linked to funding, challenges related to national and institutional contexts – echo concerns that have been highlighted in previous studies on equitable partnerships.

The Country Profiles, supplied as an Annex to this report, offer further insights on how equity is understood and experienced in each of the four focus countries.

---

[16] UKCDR and Essence on Health Research (2022) *Four Approaches to Supporting Equitable Research Partnerships*, https://www.ukcdr.org.uk/wp- content/uploads/2022/09/UKCDR_ESSENCE_Equitable_ Research_Partnerships.pdf

3.2 Sustainability of international HE partnerships

In this section of the report, we consider the importance of sustainability in international partnerships, as well as its relationship with equity and mutual benefit. We discuss recommendations for how to improve the sustainability of partnerships, as well as challenges experienced by partners. We also reflect on how partnerships can contribute to efforts to improve inclusion of women and marginalised groups, in line with the UN SDGs, as well as creating opportunities for young people in Africa.

3.2.1 Embedding sustainability in international partnerships

Sustainability, in its broadest sense, is the ability to maintain the impact and mission of a project in the long term, beyond the end of the project itself. In international development, sustainable development seeks to tackle the underlying causes of economic, social and environment problems and create a legacy that is resilient and continues with fewer external inputs.[17] Consistent with these objectives, funders want to ensure that international partnerships are as efficient, impactful and sustainable as possible. This pressure has been heightened in a context where many budgets, including the UK's official development assistance (ODA) budget, are being squeezed.

Sustainability of partnerships

Sustainability in the context of international higher education partnerships concerns the continuation of the partnership's outputs and impacts.

Funders increasingly ask partners to think about sustainability, and how partnerships might continue without funding, during the application stage. The funders we interviewed acknowledged that reviewers did not necessarily place significant weight on this criterion when evaluating proposals.

Our research suggests that planning for the future of partnerships is not always prioritised by partners themselves, especially during the early stages.

A significant proportion of survey respondents stated that they had not developed an agreed plan for how the partnership would continue beyond the funding period (Figure 11). Respondents in Kenya were the most likely to say that they had developed a plan. However, less than a third of respondents in Ghana, Kenya and South Africa had discussed this issue during the planning stage of the project.

Figure 11: Was there an agreed plan for how the partnership(s) would continue beyond the funding period?
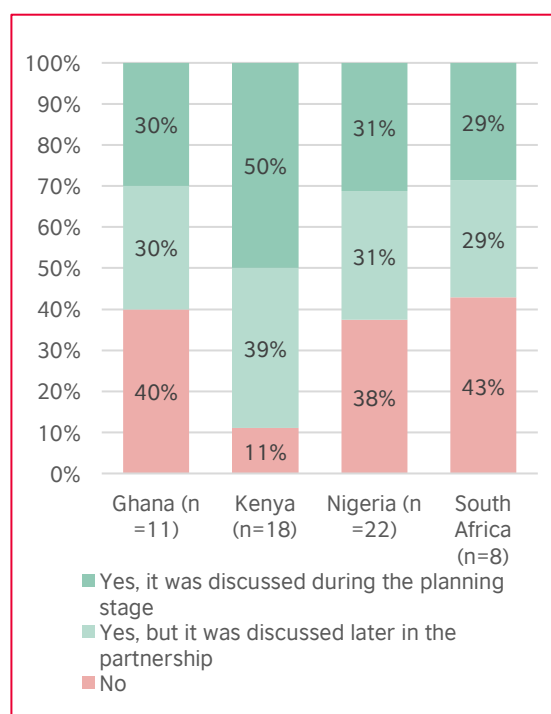
Source: Technopolis, survey results

---

[17] THE SDG Partnership guidebook, p.13

While sustaining partnerships was not always discussed during the partnership, the majority of survey respondents reported that many of their partnerships had continued beyond the initial grant funding period.

Figure 12: Was the partnership(s) sustained past the initial grant funding period?

Source: Technopolis, survey results

Interviewees observed that the sustainability of partnerships is highly dependent on the motivations of the organisations involved.

> **"The sustainability of partnerships depends on the people involved, their motivations, and their willingness to share knowledge and resources."**
>
> HE stakeholder, South Africa

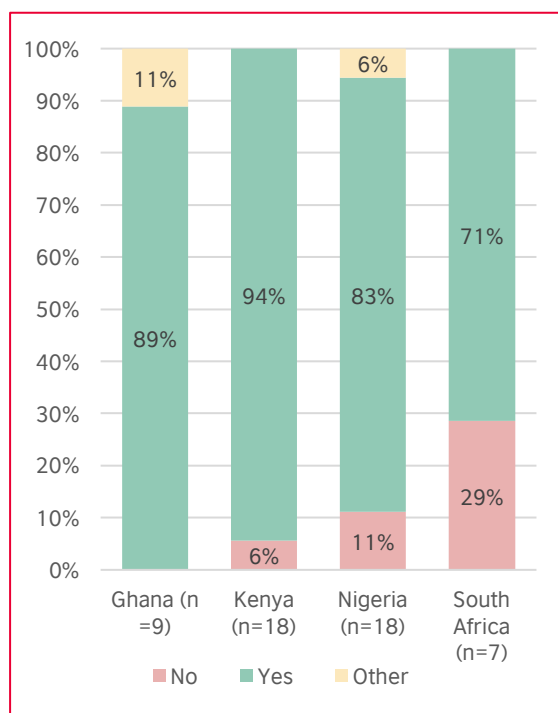Relatedly, stakeholders who had managed to sustain partnerships reported that this was due to high levels of commitment on both sides of the partnership.

> **"We maintain and nurture our relationships, ensuring they remain strong and productive. The key is to establish and uphold concrete credibility by being transparent and dependable. Partners are looking for honesty and integrity, and it is crucial to demonstrate that we are truthful and committed to delivering on our promises."**
>
> HE stakeholder, Nigeria

Access to long-term funding

Many HE stakeholders in Sub-Saharan Africa stated that the short duration of many funded partnerships created a barrier to sustainability.

> **"The sustainability of academic partnerships often hinges on the availability of funding. Many partnerships become active only when there is funding for collaborative research, and they tend to dissolve once the funding ends. To address this issue, it's essential to institutionalize partnerships rather than limit them to specific research projects or individual departments."**
>
> HE stakeholder, South Africa

There is a high level of awareness of the issue of funding and its relationships with sustainability. The challenges created by reliance on short-term project funding have been discussed widely in the literature on international partnerships, in terms of both equity and sustainability.[18] Moreover, in interviews, funders also acknowledged the challenges created by partnerships failing to secure follow-on funding.

[18] See, for example, UKCDR and Essence on Health Research (2022) *Four Approaches to Supporting Equitable Research Partnerships*, https://www.ukcdr.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/2022/09/UKCDR_ESSENCE_Equitable_Research_Partnerships.pdf; Karl J. Kunert,et al. (2020). Factors facilitating sustainable scientific partnerships between developed and developing countries. *Outlook on Agriculture, 49*(3), 204-214. https://doi.org/10.1177/0030727020939592; British Council and ACU (2021) *Role of international higher education partnerships in contributing to the sustainable development goals;*

> "International partnerships have to be long-term oriented; not only 3-6 or 12 months... Partnerships in Africa should be longer. It implies more confidence in the work we are doing."
>
> HE stakeholder, Ghana

While long-term funding and ongoing investment are key factors in sustaining equitable partnerships, many funders face challenges linked to their income streams, which prevent them from making longstanding commitments to individual partnerships.

Given the realities of the current funding landscape, partnerships need to consider how they will sustain the outcomes of their projects, if they do not secure additional funding. They also need to consider alternative funding sources.

> "Because of the mutual interest that each partner has and the fact that the universities want this partnership to be able to be sustainable, they keep on looking for opportunities together and then work together on proposals and submit them together."
>
> HE stakeholder, Kenya

Our survey results demonstrate that there are various ways in which projects are sustained by partners after the initial grant funding ends (Figure 13).

> "Sustainability is also about the people, being able to work together and trusting one another and if one partners not able to identify a suitable source for projects to keep the collaboration going, the other partner might have additional sources."
>
> HE stakeholder, South Africa

24% of respondents had been able to continue the same project with additional external funding and 11% had sustained projects using internal resource. A further 16% had used the partnership as a springboard for developing new projects with external funding. **The highest proportion (49%) of respondents stated that they had maintained the networks and relationships created through the project.** In interviews, networks and research groups were frequently referenced as one of the main ways that partnerships live on, even once projects end.

> "Develop communities of practice you know people with similar interests, so you can be meeting and talking about what has happened. People have interest in research in certain areas, so they are able still to connect with each other and work jointly together when the project ends."
>
> HE stakeholder, Kenya

Figure 13: How partnerships were sustained beyond the initial grant funding period: Ghana, Kenya, Nigeria, South Africa (n=52)

- Yes - Continuation of the same project(s) with additional external funding
- Yes - Continuation of the same project(s) using internal resource
- Yes - Continuation of relationships and networks created through the project
- Yes - Development of new project(s) with external funding
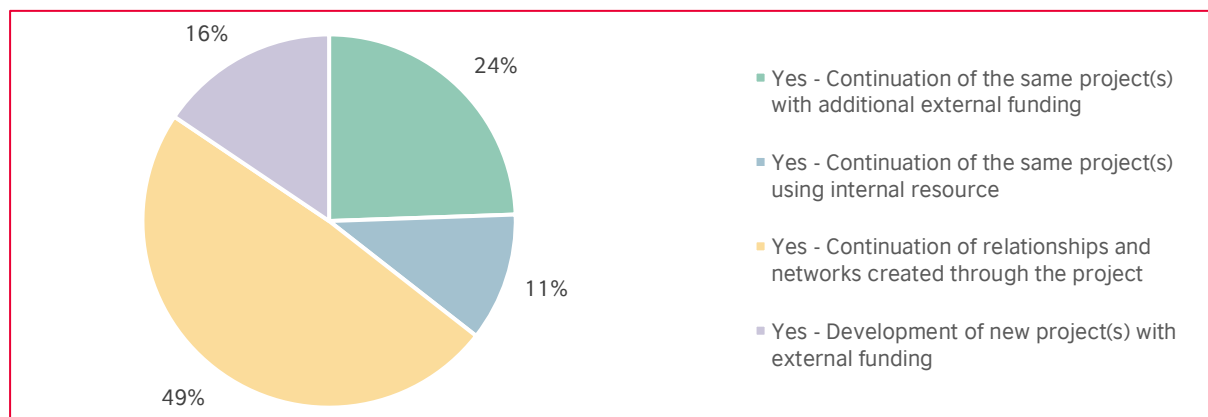
Source: Technopolis, survey results

3.2.2 Capacity building and system-level sustainability

As well as ensuring sustainability of results on a project level, there is a growing emphasis on building sustainability on a system level. **This means building infrastructure and systems to support current and future needs.**

> **"In situations where institutions lack capacity, they should build their capacity in their areas of weaknesses and then start to demonstrate that capacity, start to draw on the capacity."**
>
> HE stakeholder, Nigeria

To complement this work, African HEIs need to be given opportunities to build institutional capacity across administrative and academic departments.

> **"The most important is capacity building and this capacity building is both in terms of individual levels, where people have people open up their minds to new ways of doing things, and they're trained, but also at institutional level, where we get the capacity of the institutions being enhanced in a way that maybe we revise our policies, we start doing things differently. Some partnerships come with some grants that can result into maybe development of some infrastructure or buying of some equipment. So, capacity building is big."**
>
> HE stakeholder, Kenya

Increasing the capacity of institutions in the Global South can offer a range of long-term benefits, including their ability to deliver high quality research and teaching external to their partnership projects.

Interviewees highlighted the importance of institutionalising partnerships, as part of efforts to extend the impact of partnerships.

> **"By expanding the partnership across various faculties, disciplines, and departments within a university, a broader base of researchers and students can become involved. This approach not only enhances collaboration but also makes the partnership more integral to the institution's overall strategy. It helps gain support from university executives, such as Vice Chancellors or Presidents, because the partnership is seen as contributing to multiple areas of the university, rather than being tied to a single researcher or project."**
>
> HE stakeholder, South Africa

> **"The key one is to consider institutionalising the projects because, when they start, the projects are seen as outside the university. Taking the projects and inserting them into the programmes of the university really helps. What would help is where institutions adopt these projects as part of their activities within their strategic plans that they have, so that they're able to allocate resources, time and even measure the performance of the project after the funding process is completed."**
>
> HE stakeholder, Kenya

Several interviewees expressed the view that building capacity in the Global South should aim to reduce dependence on Northern funding and expertise.

This goal is in line with the principles of the Africa Charter, which was co-created by HE stakeholders and research bodies in Africa and promotes principles for transformative research partnerships.[19]

> "To be transformative, research collaborations must not only ensure equity in the concrete arrangements for join inquiry – the division of labour, decision-making, access to rewards, inclusion of non-academic stakeholders and the targeting of capacity building efforts. They must, in addition, actively redress the multiple layers of power imbalances in the production of scientific knowledge, which constitute an uneven playing field in global science and which systematically disadvantage the continent as well limit the potential of global scholarship."
>
> Africa Charter

While the focus of the Charter is on science, the principle of working towards greater equity on a system level, as well as a partnership level, has broader applicability to all international higher education partnerships.

3.2.3 Improving outcomes for women, marginalised groups and youths

International higher education partnerships offer considerable potential to contribute to sustainable development. Moreover, there is evidence that international partnerships have contributed to all 17 SDGs, either by contributing to the knowledge base or by implemented new knowledge (e.g. through teaching and learning partnerships).[20]

A number of stakeholders suggested that the SDGs had influenced both funders' and their own organisations' priorities. However, research partnerships often receive greater levels of recognition and funding, compared to teaching or third mission partnerships.

> "In universities, especially in South Africa, there's a strong emphasis on research over teaching and community engagement."
>
> HE stakeholder, South Africa

In line with the research questions for this study, the following section explores the ways in which international partnerships can improve the inclusion of women and marginalised groups, as well as youth in Africa.

Inclusion of women and marginalised groups

The UN SDGs recognise the importance of addressing the inclusion of women and marginalised groups.

Goal 5 of the UN's Sustainable development goals is to "Achieve gender equality and empower all women and girls", by removing legal, social and economic barriers. Ending discrimination against women and girls and providing equal access to education, social protection and economic resources are major goals.

[19] https://parc.bristol.ac.uk/africa-charter/

[20] British Council and ACU (2021) *Role of international higher education partnerships in contributing to the sustainable development goals*

10 REDUCED INEQUALITIES

Goal 10 of the SDGs is to "Reduce inequality within and among countries". The persistence of inequalities based on income, sex, age, disability, sexual orientation, race, class, ethnicity, and religion has a negative impact on people's lives and limits social and economic development.

International HE partnerships can play a crucial role in making communities and societies more equal. As is discussed in more detail in the Country Profiles (Annex to this report), there are many examples of partnerships that work to generate outcomes and impacts that directly address the needs of disadvantaged and marginalised communities, for example by improving their access to education and training.

The extent to which gender and social inclusion is formalised within partnerships seems to vary, however. Some stakeholders reported having Gender Equality and Social Inclusion plans embedded in their partnerships and a gender requirement for all activities, for example. One interviewee in Ghana stated that all their projects/partnerships had an explicit theory of change that identified pathways to societal impact.

> **"We consider gender as a big issue and now we are talking about gender budgeting. So we say that if you bring any programme for us to really evaluate or you design any programme in any of the departments, you have to tell us your gender budget – How many people are you budgeting for? Who are women who can take centre stage in the project?"**
>
> HE stakeholder, Ghana

It is not sufficient for women and minorities to simply be the target of partnerships, the benefits of participating directly in international HE partnerships must be made available to women and other marginalised groups.

While **82% of our survey respondents agreed or strongly agreed that women and other marginalised groups had equal opportunities to participate in the partnership**, 12% disagreed or strongly disagreed (Figure 14).

Figure 14: Women and other marginalised groups had equal opportunities to participate in the partnership
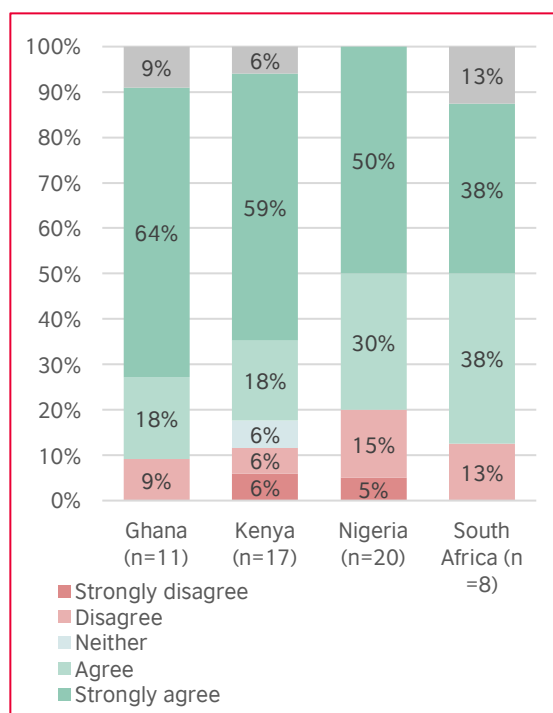
Source: Technopolis, survey results

Both funders and partners must take steps to ensure that equal access is a fundamental principle within programmes and projects. Although some respondents, noted that this was already a common feature of funding arrangements.

> **"Funders are very finely attuned to gender equity. Partnerships make sure that there is a gender equity amongst the research team and the supervisors."**
>
> HE stakeholder, South Africa

Several survey respondents indicated that funding for women could be increased, women could be incorporated into partnerships more and women should occupy more leadership roles.

Based on our interviews, challenges related to Equality, Diversity and Inclusion tend to be specific to national and local contexts. For example, an interviewee observed that tribalism in Kenya remains a significant issue, creating barriers to access based on ethnicity. Another interviewee stated that hierarchies within Nigerian HEIs can create barriers to certain groups who are underrepresented at the higher levels of institutions, including women. Rural-urban divides were also identified by interviewees in Ghana and Nigeria.

Equitable access to partnership opportunities is not the end of the story, however. Women and marginalised groups also need to be fully integrated into projects and their contributions valued, whether as members of the project team or as participants. Around 1 in 10 of all survey respondents reported that the expertise of women and marginalised groups was not valued in their partnership(s), with respondents in Nigeria and South Africa more likely to indicate this was an issue they experienced.

This suggests a need for funders and partners to ensure that EDI principles are embedded in partnerships and the inputs from diverse groups respected and valued.

Figure 15: The expertise of women and other marginalised groups was valued (n=56)
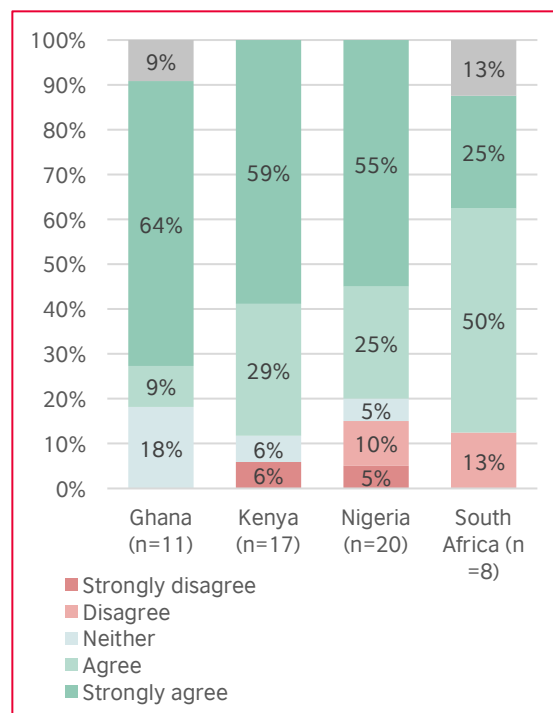
Source: Technopolis, survey results

With regards to the impacts of the projects themselves, **across all survey respondents, 68% (n=70) said their partnership(s) promoted outcomes that included women and other marginalised groups to a large or very large extent**.

Amongst the focus countries (Figure 14), respondents from Kenya were most likely to say their project did this, whereas respondents from Nigeria provided much more mixed responses, with 15% of respondents indicating that their project only did so to a small extent or not at all.

The survey sample covered a diverse range of partnership projects, not all of which were specifically focused on societal issues, and so it is likely that a significant proportion of projects were not designed with this goal in mind.

Figure 16: Partnerships' promotion of outcomes that included women and marginalised groups
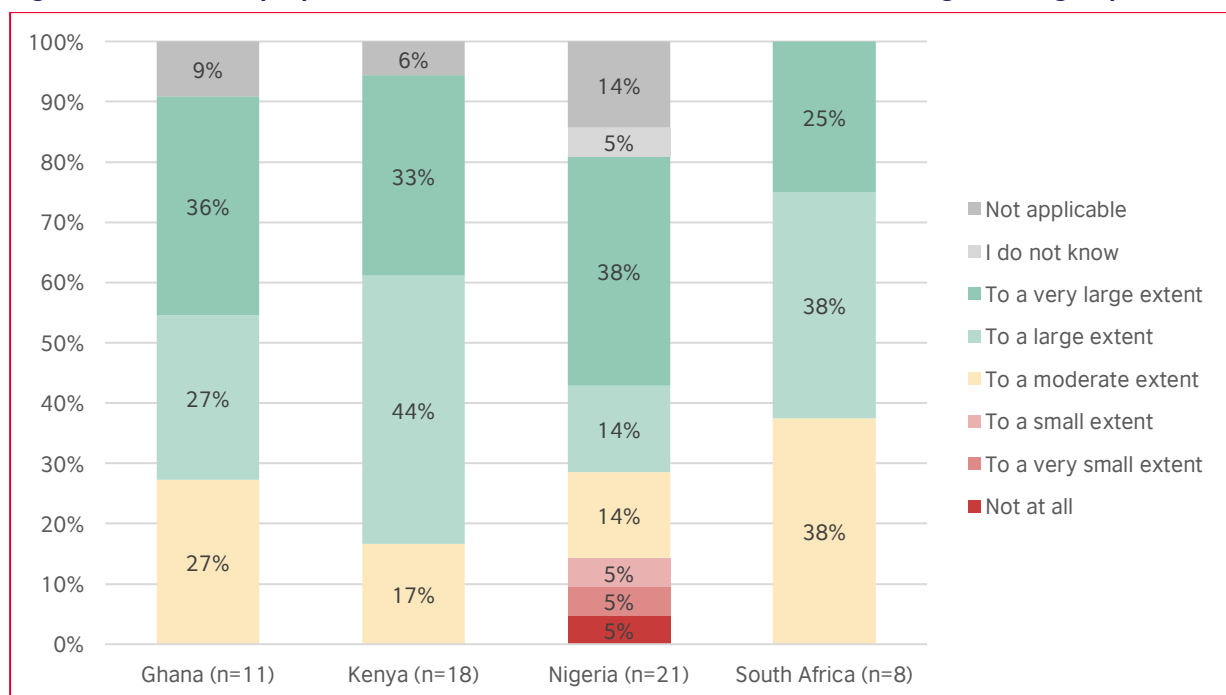
Source: Technopolis, survey results

Education partnerships and inclusion

Equitable and inclusive education systems ensure that all students can fulfil their educational potential, irrespective of the personal and social circumstances. However, equity gaps prevent many young people from accessing a quality education. In response to these challenges, the UN SDG4 Quality Education includes several goals linked to equity, diversity and education, to be achieved by 2030:

- Ensure that all girls and boys complete free, equitable and quality primary and secondary education leading to relevant and Goal-4 effective learning outcomes

- Ensure equal access for all women and men to affordable and quality technical, vocational and tertiary education, including university

- Ensure that all learners acquire the knowledge and skills needed to promote sustainable development, including, among others, through education for sustainable development and sustainable lifestyles, human rights, gender equality, promotion of a culture of peace and non-violence, global citizenship and appreciation of cultural diversity and of culture's contribution to sustainable development

- Build and upgrade education facilities that are child, disability and gender sensitive and provide safe, nonviolent, inclusive and effective learning environments for all.

As discussed in more detail in the Country Profiles (Annex to this report), these development challenges are present across Sub-Saharan Africa and governments are developing policies to address them.

International partnerships linked to education offer significant potential to make progress towards these goals. A 2022 study commissioned by the British Council and the Association of Commonwealth Universities revealed that a large proportion of international partnerships include activities linked to SDG4 Quality Education.

Key themes identified through the research included curriculum development, PhD training and improvements to facilities in HEIs; improving accessibility to higher education; addressing education issues in local communities; and providing scholarships and support to students.[21]

Of the survey respondents who had participated in partnerships linked to education, 50% (n=36) reported that their partnership(s) had created more opportunities for students from diverse groups (Figure 17).

Amongst the four focus countries, there were more mixed views expressed by respondents from Nigeria, but 53% of respondents in the country (n=14) nonetheless felt that opportunities had been created to a large or very large extent.

The reported impact that education partnerships had on the inclusion of students with disabilities was much lower (Figure 17), with only 27% of respondents (n=33) indicating that their partnership(s) had improved the inclusion of students with disabilities, compared to 45% of respondents who said their partnership had either not made an impact or only to a small extent.

Figure 17: Education partnerships' outcomes and impacts on inclusion
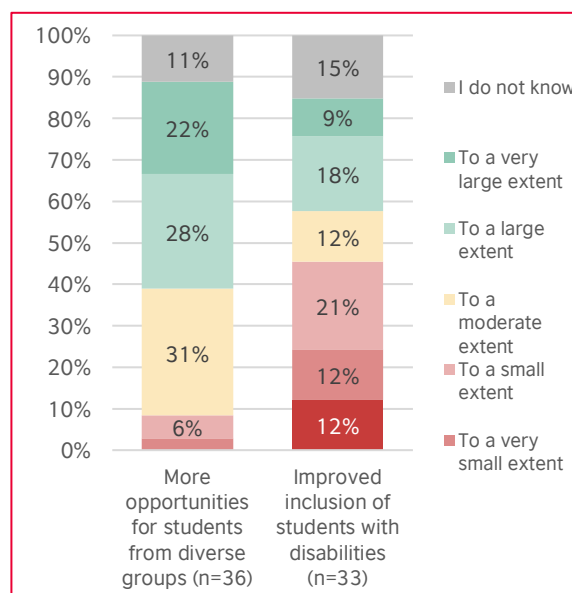
Source: Technopolis, survey results

---

[21] British Council and ACU (2021) *Role of international higher education partnerships in contributing to the sustainable development goals*

While the survey data does not capture in detail the types of education partnerships that respondents were involved with, and covers a relatively small sample, this finding nonetheless highlights the need to embed concepts of inclusivity into a broad range of projects and programmes.

A representative of AAU, interviewed for this study, stated that HEIs are taking steps towards accommodating disabilities and improving accessibility. However, based on our desk research, there are relatively few funding opportunities for partnerships related to addressing challenges linked to disabilities.

Opportunities for young people

Africa has the youngest population in the world, with 70% of Sub-Saharan Africans aged under 30. Youth in Africa are expected to constitute 42% of the global youth population by 2030. This demographic shift creates considerable challenges, as well as opportunities.

Countries in Sub-Saharan Africa are struggling to scale up their public services, including education, and grow their economies in ways that provide opportunities for all young people. Unemployment, underemployment and a lack of opportunities are considerable barriers to young Africans realising their potential. Policies and programmes that support young people are critical in addressing these challenges.

> "Another benefit is helping us to tap into the huge youth population that is in Africa. By ourselves, we won't be able to empower them for the future of Africa. So when we work with partners from elsewhere, we are able to empower many more lives than we would have if we were just by ourselves."
>
> HE stakeholder, Kenya

International higher education partnerships offer considerable potential to expand opportunities for young people, whether directly through increased educational opportunities and access to training, or more broadly by leading to positive impacts in areas such as health, employment and rights.

> "Issues about employability are very important. That is why we are implementing programmes that are re-engineering the curriculum of universities to ensure that industry makes a lot of input in the academic programmes. So there are a number of initiatives that we have come up with that are benefiting the youth on a broad scale."
>
> HE stakeholder, Ghana

Across all survey respondents, 72% (n=70) stated that their partnership had created opportunities for young people to a large or very large extent. Across the four focus countries (Figure 18), the proportion of respondents reporting large or very large outcomes and impacts in this area were highest in Ghana and South Africa. Even in Nigeria, the country in which respondents reported relatively lower impact, 66% of respondents still reported that their partnership had created opportunities for young people to a large or very large extent.

Figure 18: Partnerships' impact on new opportunities for young people, by country
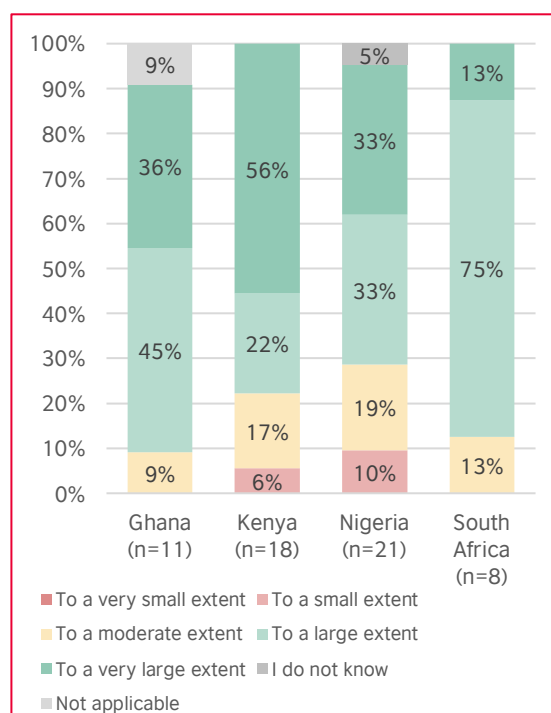
Source: Technopolis, survey results

Survey respondents involved in research and third mission projects were more inclined to indicate that the project had created opportunities for young people, than those involved in education. Moreover, respondents involved in education projects were more likely to say that their partnership created opportunities for young people to only very small or small extent, with 16% responding in this way comp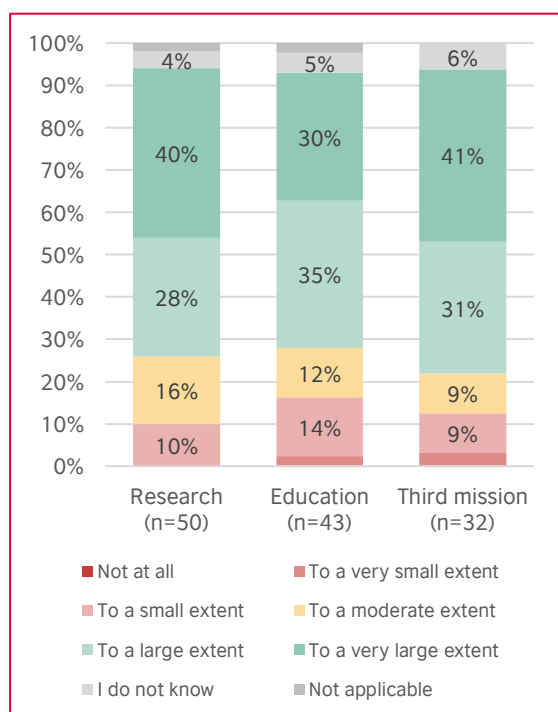ared to 10% for research and 12% for third mission. While these are relatively small margins, it is nonetheless surprising.

Figure 19: Partnerships' impact on new opportunities for young people, by partnership type

Source: Technopolis, survey results

HE stakeholders in Sub-Saharan Africa also shared examples of how partnerships enabled them to create opportunities for young people. An interviewee in Ghana stated that international education partnerships with schools in rural communities, where progression to higher education was low, had enabled young people, including women, to access higher education, as well as vocational and technical education. In turn, this had improved employability opportunities. They felt that access to UK qualifications, that were recognised globally, also gave young people more international mobility options.

3.2.4 Conclusions on sustainability of partnerships and their outcomes

Despite sustainability becoming a priority for many funders, in line with wider thinking around sustainable development, challenges persist in terms of ensuring the long-term sustainability of partnerships and/or their outcomes and impacts.

Our research suggests that many partners do not discuss sustainability and, more specifically, arrangements for when initial grant funding ends.

The fact that most funding remains relatively short-term and project-based means that partners need to address these types of issues in their broader discussions around goal setting, aims and impacts.

Inclusion of women and minorities, not only in relation to the activities and outcomes of projects, but also within partnership teams is a crucial part of making partnerships more equitable. Developing more formalised arrangements for tracking this aspect of programmes and/or projects could help to advance progress in this area. Similarly, improving diversity and the inclusion of students with disabilities in education in Africa will only move forward if effort is directed specifically towards these outcomes.

Many types of partnerships, not just those in education, can have positive impacts on young people in Africa. In our Country Profiles (Annex to this report), there are various examples of projects which have provided opportunities for young people, improving their access to a range of opportunities. While they may not always be the primary focus of a partnership, these types of outcomes and impacts can be maximised, if they are considered during the planning stages.

3.3 Impact of TNE and other partnerships on education

In this section of the report, we examine how TNE partnerships and other types of partnerships can strengthen local capacity and have positive outcomes and impacts related to education in Sub-Saharan Africa.

There has been less research on TNE partnerships, compared to research partnerships, but interest in this issue has grown recently. Key actors in TNE such as the British Council and Universities UK International are publishing more analysis and guidance relating to TNE. In this context, TNE is often viewed through the lens of opportunities and challenges for UK HEIs. However, UUKI's recent publications on "Why do equitable partnerships in transnational education matter?" demonstrate a growing awareness that TNE partnerships need to be equitable and mutually beneficial.

3.3.1 Potential benefits of TNE partnerships

Transnational education (TNE) is a growing aspect of institutions' international activity and many universities in the Global North, particularly in the UK, are exploring opportunities to increase their TNE provision. Transnational education, as defined by the British Council, is "the mobility of academic programmes and providers across international borders." In practical terms, "Transnational education (TNE) is education delivered in a country other than the country in which the awarding institution is based, e.g., students based in country Y studying for a degree from a university in country Z."[22]

TNE partnerships offer a variety of potential benefits for institutions, for students, and for the Higher Education sector. The British Council's 2022 report *The global environment for transnational education, UK degrees and qualifications:*[23] identifies several **key benefits**:

- **Broadening of the curriculum.** TNE can enable local institutions to offer a wider array of programmes, addressing gaps in their provision. Moreover, HEIs can develop specialised and vocational courses that may not currently be available domestically.

- **Increased opportunities for local and international students.** TNE programmes can provide additional places for students, helping to address unmet demand, especially in regions with limited access to higher education. Courses can attract students from different countries, increasing enrolment and improving diversity.

- **Enhanced quality of education.** Partnering with foreign HEIs allows local universities to adopt best practices in teaching and curriculum development. Robust quality assurance measures, which can combine practices from both institutions and/or countries, promote high standards and ensure confidence in qualifications.

- **Capacity building.** Teaching and support staff at partner institutions often receive training and development opportunities, enhancing their skills and educational expertise. TNE partnerships can also lead to the establishment of better infrastructure and resources in local institutions, aiding long-term growth.

- **Improved visibility and reputation for institutions.** Participation in TNE enhances the visibility and reputation of local institutions on a global scale. TNE partnerships create international networking opportunities, allowing HEIs to connect with a broader range of stakeholders, including other universities, industries, and policymakers.

---

[22] Universities UK (2024) "What is the UK Higher Education transnational education?", https://www.universitiesuk.ac.uk/universities-uk-international/explore-uuki/transnational-education/what-uk-higher-education-transnational#:~:text=Transnational%20education%20(TNE)%20is%20education,delivered%20outside%20of%20the%20UK.

[23] British Council (2022) *The global environment for transnational education, UK degrees and qualifications: Findings and recommendations from primary research,* https://www.britishcouncil.org/sites/default/files/bc_environment_for_tne_partnerships_global_v2.pdf

- **Opportunities for research collaboration.** The partnerships and networks fostered through TNE can, in turn, provide institutions with opportunities to participate in other types of partnerships including research collaborations.

- **Financial benefits for HEIs and students.** Growth in student numbers can increase institutions' income, which can then be invested in areas like staffing and infrastructure. Studying for an international qualification at a partner institution is more accessible and less expensive than travelling abroad for higher education.

A present, many students in Sub-Saharan Africa are unable to progress to university or other forms of tertiary education because of a lack of student places. All four of the focus countries in this study, as our Country Profiles (Annex to this report) show, face challenges concerning their ability to increase capacity to meet rapidly growing demand for higher education. While TNE alone cannot address this issue, it nonetheless offers a way to increase the availability of higher education, including for underserved communities.

While there are many institutions already providing high-quality programmes in Sub-Saharan Africa, there are nevertheless problems with low-quality programmes and concerns about the relevance of qualifications. TNE's quality assurance processes and links to well-established international HEIs can provide reassurance to students that they will receive high quality education and gain an internationally recognised qualification.

The broader potential benefits for TNE partner institutions – capacity building, international visibility and opportunities for further collaboration – are more contingent on the setup and implementation of specific partnerships.

3.3.2 Setup and models of TNE Partnerships

TNE covers a wide range of tertiary qualifications, including HE awards, TVET qualifications, professional awards, and micro-credentials. The British Council has identified four common award models for TNE:[24]

- Validation: An in-country partner designs their own programme, but the award is from an international institution

- Franchise: A programme is run by an overseas partner, in the same way it would in the country of origin

- Joint award: The award is given jointly by two (or more) institutions

- Dual (or double award): An award is given by both partners

However, the terminology around TNE is still evolving and may be understood in different ways in different contexts.

There are also a wide range of TNE delivery models. Established approaches include "flying faculty" where staff deliver courses internationally; distance learning through online resources; blended delivery using a mix of international and local staff; and international campuses. Other, emerging delivery models include Massive Open Online Courses (MOOCs), virtual mobility and online learning; work-integrated learning; personalised learning; and micro-credentials.[25]

Emerging TNE models have the potential to improve access to tertiary education, by providing greater accessibility and flexibility to learning from a variety of backgrounds.

> **"We all know the majority of the HE population comes from cities, so bringing up higher education in rural communities could develop their skills, make them competitive in the job market."**
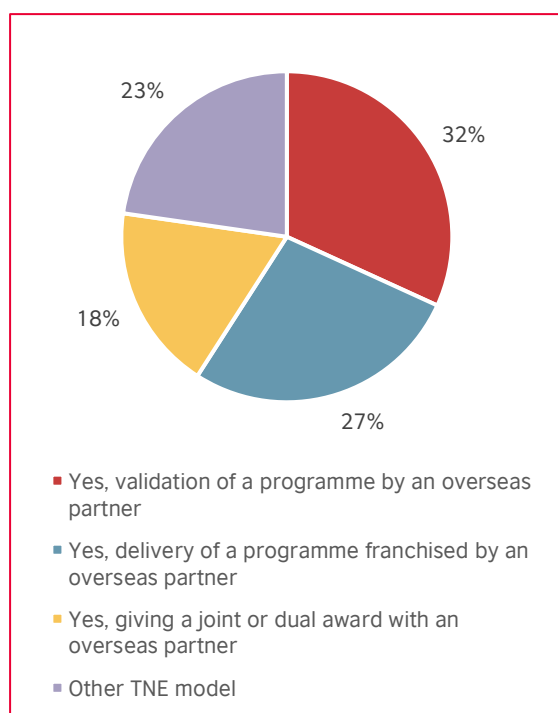>
> HE stakeholder, Ghana

---

[24] British Council (2023) *Transnational education strategy: 2023-25*, https://www.britishcouncil.org/sites/default/files/transnationaleducationstrategy.pdf

[25] ibid

The variety of TNE models is reflected in our survey results. Respondents were engaged in partnerships across several different TNE models (Figure 20). The responses specified under "Other TNE model" reflected the breadth of potential ways in which TNE is understood. These included global programmes not specifically targeted at Africa, training provision without formal certification, capacity building programmes, employability programmes, and transnational research on higher education.

Figure 20: TNE models present in education partnerships (n=14)

- Yes, validation of a programme by an overseas partner
- Yes, delivery of a programme franchised by an overseas partner
- Yes, giving a joint or dual award with an overseas partner
- Other TNE model

Source: Technopolis, survey results

Not all approaches to TNE create ideal conditions for equitable partnerships. A 2021 study conducted by DAAD and the British Council identified two major approaches to TNE provision: "Independent", in which the foreign HEI takes primary responsibility for the design, delivery and quality assurance of a course offered in another country and "collaborative", where the two countries work together on these elements.[26]

When in-country partners are involved, the power dynamic created by the "independent" approach means that these partnerships are unlikely to be equitable. Moreover, when local partners are not involved in curriculum development, there is a high risk that the course will not engage sufficiently with relevant contexts and will fail to address local needs.

A 2024 study by UUKI emphasised that equity in TNE partnerships requires collaboration, including co-design, co-delivery and co-supervision, as well as making mutual decisions on the appropriate TNE model, costings and location.[27] For partnerships to succeed, the needs of both institutions and the wider environment (including, for example, skills shortages), had to be taken in account. Moreover, in line with wider perspectives on equity in partnerships between the Global North and Global South, interviewees felt that the curriculum and pedagogy should integrate local knowledge from both sides of the partnership.

In our survey, respondents involved in TNE partnerships reported lower levels of satisfaction than those involved in Research partnerships not only for overall equity in the partnership, but also in relation to various other areas linked to equity and mutual benefit (Figure 21). This trend suggests that achieving equity in TNE partnerships is currently proving more challenging for partners.

---

[26] British Council (2023) *Transnational Education Strategy: 2023-25*, https://www.britishcouncil.org/sites/default/files/transnationaleducationstrategy.pdf
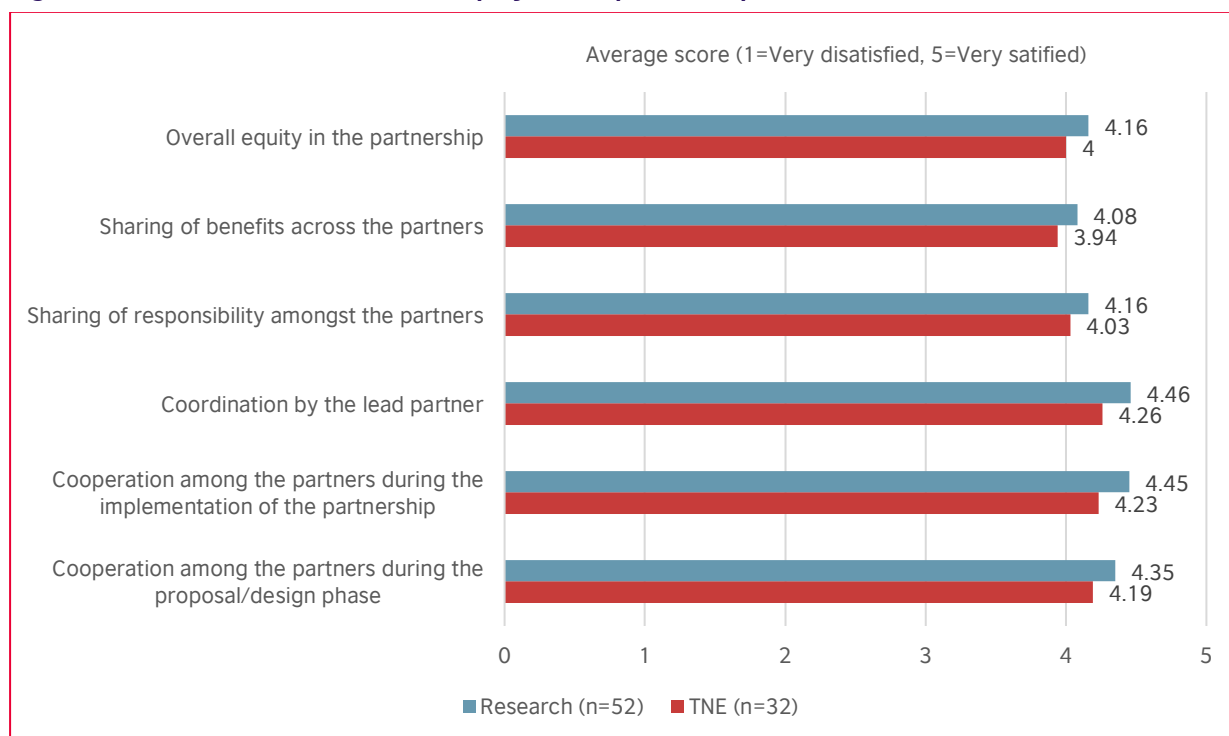
[27] UUKI (2024) Developing equitable TNE partnerships: where to begin, https://www.universitiesuk.ac.uk/universities-uk-international/insights-and-publications/uuki-insights/developing-equitable-tne-partnerships

Figure 21: Partners' satisfaction with equity in TNE partnerships

Source: Technopolis, survey results

3.3.3 Challenges faced by TNE partnerships

At present, a range of barriers and challenges affect international TNE partnerships. As the British Council has reported, these challenges exist on three main levels – system, institution and student.[28]

System-level barriers

System-level barriers typically arise from in-country regulatory and policy environments for HE. These include: policies that prohibit TNE; a lack of clear regulatory frameworks for TNE; inconsistent implementation of HE policies; a lack of recognition for foreign degrees; bureaucratic barriers; and inadequate visa systems.

Until recently, Nigeria, lacked specific regulations for TNE. In 2023, the National Universities Commission (NUC) published a policy framework and guidelines for TNE.[29] This major policy breakthrough has opened the door for international TNE partnerships. The UK government and UK HEIs are at the forefront of exploring the potential of this new, more welcoming regulatory environment. Nigeria is a priority country under the UK government's International Education Strategy and, in partnership with the British Council, the Department for Business and Trade are actively working to promote the creation of new TNE partnerships. British HEIs already enjoy a strong reputation with Nigerian students, who represent the third largest cohort of international students in the UK (44,195 students in 2021-22).[30]

Ghana, Kenya and South Africa all already host TNE students. However, all three countries present challenges, particularly in terms of the regulatory environment. Ghana has a more accommodating regulatory

---

[28] British Council (2022) *The global environment for transnational education, UK degrees and qualifications: Findings and recommendations from primary research.* pp.12-13.

[29] https://www.nuc.edu.ng/wp-content/uploads/2023/12/GUIDELINES-ON-TRANSNATIONAL-EDUCATION-IN-NIGERIA1.pdf

[30] https://www.universitiesuk.ac.uk/what-we-do/policy-and-research/publications/features/uk-higher-education-data-international/international-student-data#:~:text=According%20to%20HESA%20total%20enrolment,Nigeria%20(44%2C195)

environment for TNE compared to Nigeria, but there remains a need to develop more transparent and supportive regulatory frameworks from TNE. In particular, the country current hosts a large number of Nigerian students.[31] Similarly, South Africa is currently the top international student destination in Africa, but TNE regulations are relatively vague. Moreover, there is currently a ban on double degrees in TNE, although joint degrees are allowed. Quality assurance processes are also slow for cross-border programmes. Kenya also has existing TNE provision, but of a smaller scale and primarily via distance learning. HE regulations for TNE are under-developed, particularly in relation to quality assurance.

Institution-level challenges

HEIs in Sub-Saharan Africa also face institution-level challenges that prevent them from participating in TNE partnerships. Financial constraints and a need to prioritise domestic issues limit institutions' ability to engage internationally. HEIs may also lack the experience and infrastructure to establish TNE partnerships, especially where internationalisation has not been prioritised. Related to both these areas is a lack of administrative and teaching capacity, as well as staff training and development needs, which need to be addressed to successfully implement partnerships. The British Council's research has found that these barriers can often result in the failure of TNE partnerships and can be perceived by partners in the Global North as reflecting a lack of commitment.[32]

Given these types of challenges, African HEIs often have needs that need to be addressed, in order to develop successful TNE partnerships. For example, a 2019 Report for the British Council identified a range of TNE

partnership needs for Ghanian HEIs/TEIs, including "sustained funding, administrative support, consistent and regular monitoring and evaluation, commitment to good management/governance principles and/or structures, human resource capacity building, and joint strategic planning and implementation of partnership plan and project."[33] In addition to these operational aspects, African HEIs also need additional investment in infrastructure to deliver TNE successfully. A partner involved in an education project in Nigeria emphasised, in their comments on our survey, the importance of "Investment in physical educational facilities as well as technology."

Student-level challenges

Student-level challenges impact learners' ability to engage with TNE programmes. Many students in Sub-Saharan Africa face significant financial barriers, which limits their ability to study on TNE courses. One of our survey respondents in Ghana stated, "The high cost of international education should be looked at. Many people are interested in the international higher education programs available, but the cost scares them." UUKI's recent study on TNE also identified a lack of funding for students in the Global South as a barrier to equity.[34]

At present, many TNE programmes are delivered in English, affecting the learning experience of students who struggle with English. Students who engage with TNE are more likely to be atypical students, such as mature leaners or those with caring responsibilities. TNE is also less visible to many students and they may be sceptical about the quality of TNE regulations, primarily due to lack of degree and qualification recognition..[35]

---

[31] British Council (2022) *The global environment for transnational education, UK degrees and qualifications: Findings and recommendations from primary research*.

[32] Ibid.

[33] British Council (2019*) Investigating transnational education (TNE) partnerships and the environment of distance learning in higher education institutions in Ghana*, p.88.

[34] UUKI (2024), Developing equitable TNE partnerships: where to begin, https://www.universitiesuk.ac.uk/universities-uk-international/insights-and-publications/uuki-insights/developing-equitable-tne-partnerships

[35] British Council (2022) *The global environment for transnational education, UK degrees and qualifications:*

Compared to research partnerships, there is a greater level of caution around developing TNE partnerships, due to the levels of investment and commitment involved. Moreover, universities are often much more visible as "brands" in these types of partnership, compared to individual projects. As a 2024 British Council and UUKI report discusses, UK universities can face unexpected challenges, financial losses and reputational damage, if risks are poorly understood and there is no risk management strategy in place.[36] Major areas of risk include financial risks, reputational risks, academic freedom, security considerations, relationship management, intellectual property and data management.

These challenges may deter HEIs from engaging in TNE partnerships. However, increased awareness of these issues may force HEIs to approach partnerships in a more considered way, paying close attention to local contexts and country-specific priorities. Ultimately, as several of our interviewees noted, universities in the Global North have to reflect on their appetite for risk and balance this against the potential benefits of the partnership for the Global South, as well as their own interests. They should also try to work constructively with partners to identify ways forward, when they hit barriers concerning areas like financial compliance.

Funding for TNE partnerships

Given the difficulties that HEIs in Sub-Saharan Africa can face, securing adequate funding is a crucial step towards the development and implementation of TNE partnerships. UUKI's recent study on equitable TNE partnerships found that a lack of funding for setting up partnerships, particularly in the Global South, presented a major challenge.[37] In our survey sample, many of the TNE partnerships had received substantial funding (Figure 22) with 61% receiving over $100,001 in grants, reflecting the fact that funding is arguably a precondition for the existence of TNE.

Figure 22: Grant funding attached to TNE projects (n=28)
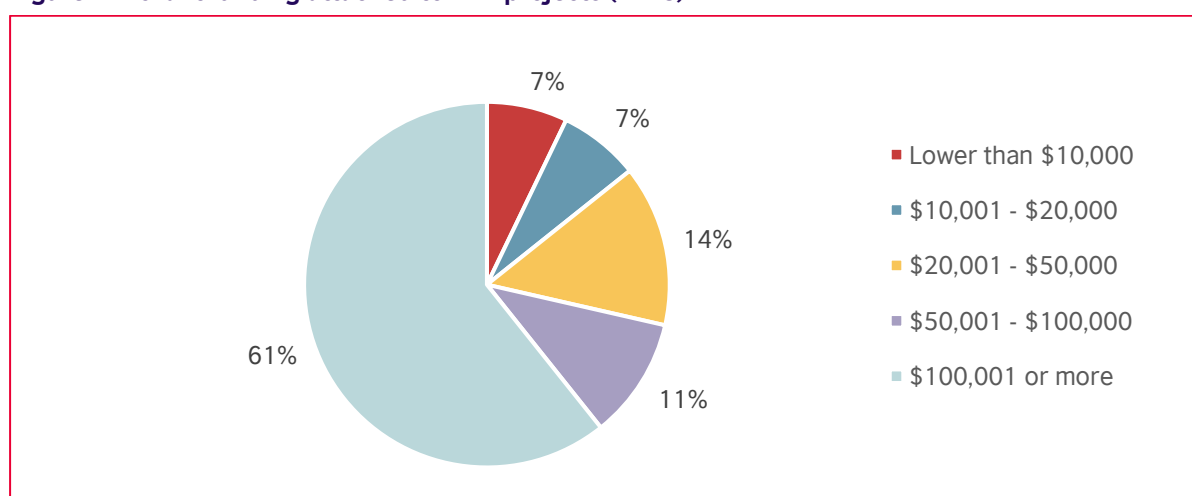
Source: Technopolis, survey results

---

[36] British Council and Universities UK International (2024) *Managing risk and developing responsible transnational education (TNE) partnerships*, p.9

[37] UUKI (2024) Developing equitable TNE partnerships: where to begin, https://www.universitiesuk.ac.uk/universities-uk-international/insights-and-publications/uuki-insights/developing-equitable-tne-partnerships

Although the vast majority of TNE partners who responded to our survey received grant funding, their organisations nonetheless had to make a range of in-kind contributions, as well as monetary investment (Figure 23).

The proportion of TNE partners reporting that they made a monetary contribution to the partnership was 42% (n=36), which was higher than the 33% reported across all survey respondents (n=65).

Respondents in TNE were also more likely to report that they made in-kind contributions,

including staff time (67% for TNE vs. 63% for all respondents), equipment and material (50% for TNE vs. 43% for all respondents), travel costs and other expenses (42% for TNE vs. 33% for all respondents), and student scholarships (28% for TNE vs. 21% for all respondents).

These types of contributions demonstrate the high levels of commitment required from organisations involved in TNE partnerships, which may prove challenging to sustain in the long term.

Figure 23: Additional contributions/investment made by TNE partners (n=36)
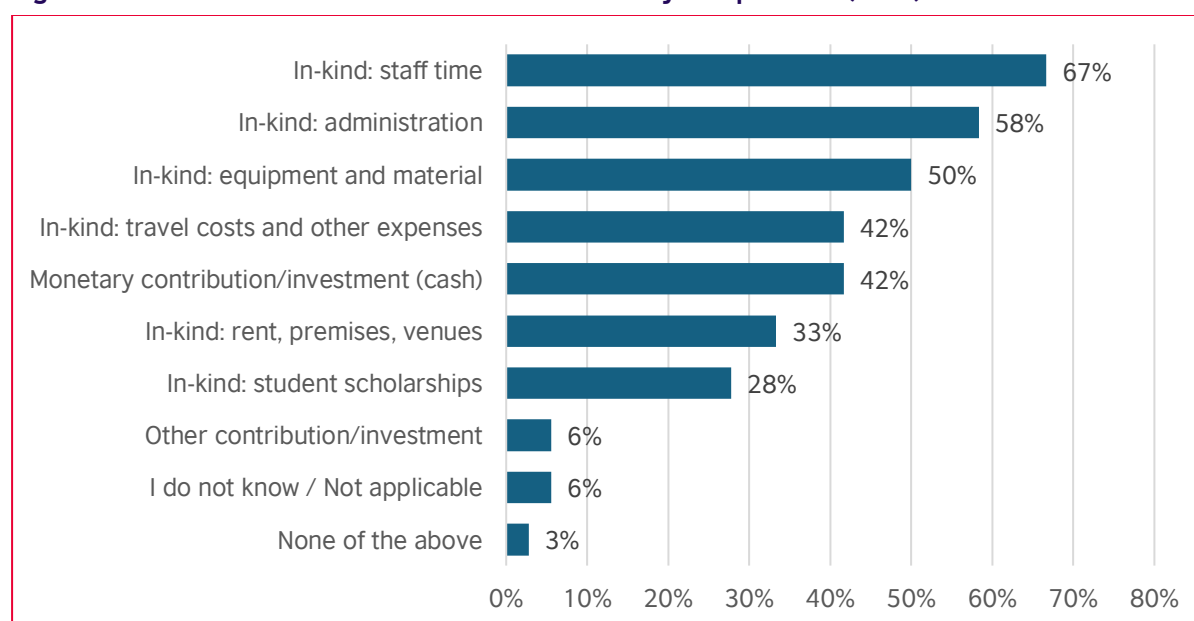
Source: Technopolis, survey results

3.3.4 Sustainability of TNE partnerships

There are a variety of funding structures for TNE partnerships. Many will have a defined partnership period, with funding agreed for a set period (such as three years) and an agreement to review and negotiate renewal by a specific end date. Other models will be based on a more long-term investment, such as overseas campuses.

Consistent with wider principles around equity, TNE partners should ensure transparency and communicate clearly with stakeholders concerning plans around funding and the renewal or winding down of programmes.

The proportion of TNE partners reporting in the survey that they had developed an agreed plan for the continuation of the partnership was very similar to the entire sample of respondents. 74% of TNE partners (n=27) said they had a plan for the continuation of the partnership, compared to 73% for all respondents across all partnership types (n=63).

Nonetheless, this response highlights that stakeholder engagement in TNE is crucial, especially because the discontinuation of partnerships can have a considerable impact on staff and students in Sub-Saharan Africa.

3.3.5 Impact of international higher education partnerships on education

International higher education partnerships have the potential to create a range of positive impacts on education in countries in Sub-Saharan Africa. As already discussed, one of the expected impacts of TNE partnerships is to increase the quality and relevance of education. However, research and third mission partnerships also have considerable potential to improve education within countries, whether as a direct aim of the project or as a secondary impact.

In our survey, the majority of partners reported that their projects had increased the quality and relevance of education to a large or very large extent. This impact was not limited to TNE partnerships. As can be seen in Figure 24, a positive impact on education was reported across partnerships linked to Research, Education and Third Mission activities.

Figure 24: Extent to which partnerships increased the quality and relevance of education, by type
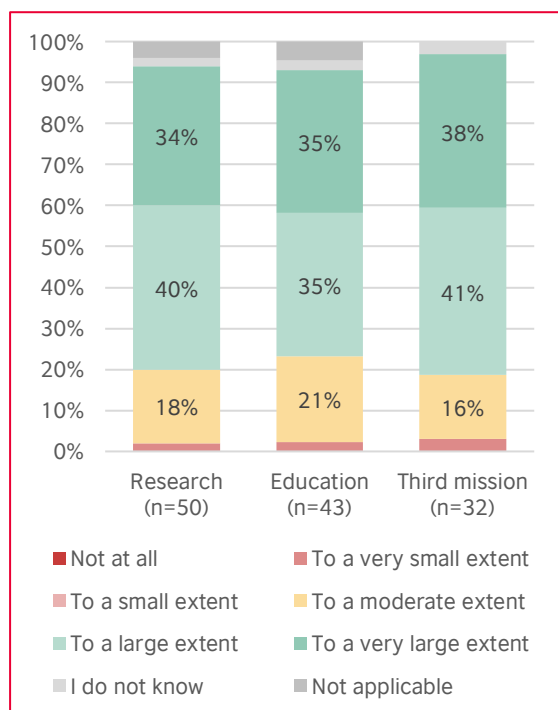
Source: Technopolis, survey results

Several interviewees indicated that their projects had led to curriculum improvements. For example, an interviewee in Ghana stated that partnerships involving industry partners had enabled universities to update their curricula to address issues related to employability.

> **"Education stakeholders are able to form collaborations and partnerships with those who are outside of the borders of Africa, in Europe as well as the other parts of the world, so that we can be able to introduce better and quality education into the local communities."**
>
> HE stakeholder, Ghana

> **"Students are drawn away from Africa. There is a need to upscale the offer of training to make the graduates more employable. Focus less on theory and more on practices, how to increase their employability and work on emerging topics and forging a link with the available opportunities of work to graduates. There is a huge skills gap."**
>
> HE stakeholder, Nigeria

Another interviewee in Kenya stated that the expertise developed through a research project on water analysis had enabled them to share relevant skills and knowledge with students.

Another widely reported outcome amongst interviewees was increased opportunities for students, typically postgraduates, to engage workshops and events in other countries.

Our survey asked respondents involved in Education partnerships (including, but not limited to, TNE), to reflect on the outcomes and impacts of their partnership(s) (Figure 25). **More innovative teaching was the most commonly reported impact, with 68% of respondents indicating that their project had achieved this to a large or very large extent** (n=38).

The majority of respondents also said that the partnership(s) had made the curriculum more relevant to the labour market, generated better employment outcomes, and improved student attainment to a large or very large extent (Figure 25).

However, a significant minority were less positive. Responses concerning whether education partnerships had led to better student retention is more mixed, although this is an area where it can be more challenging to have an impact.

Figure 25: Outcomes and impacts of Education partnerships (including TNE)
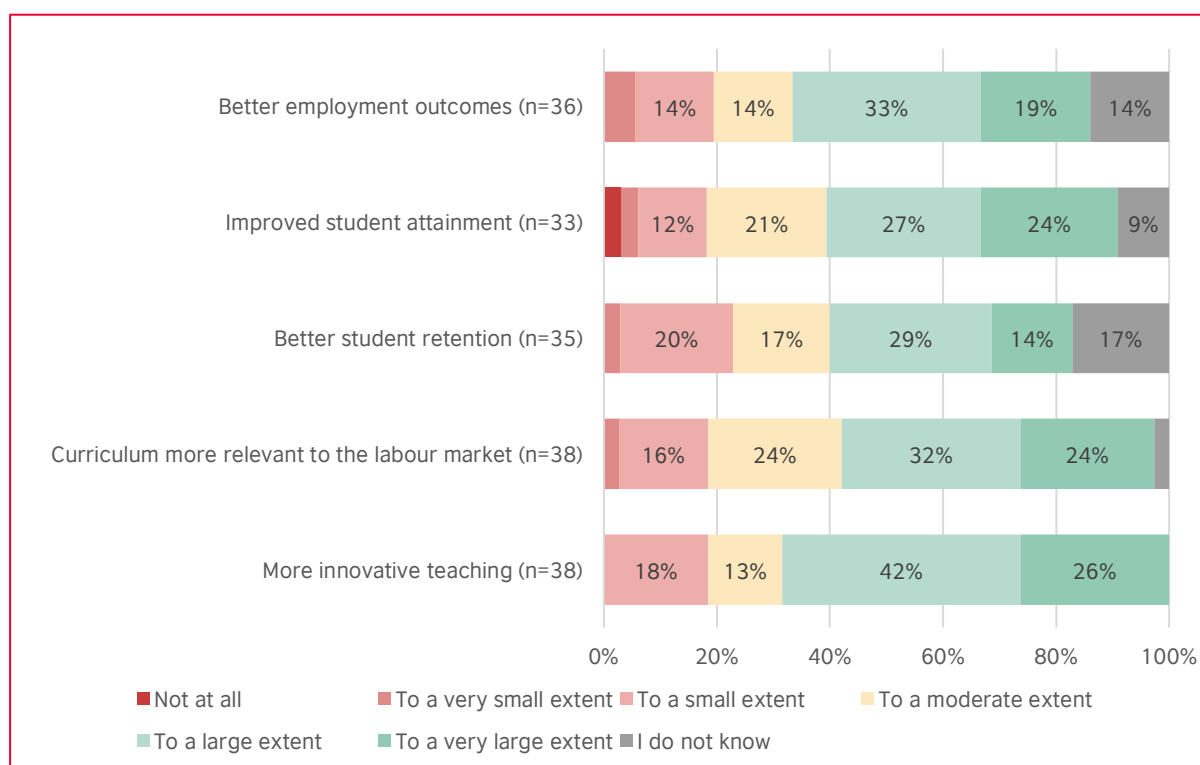
Source: Technopolis, survey results

3.3.6 Conclusions on the impact of TNE and other partnerships on education

In summary, while TNE and Education partnerships offer considerable potential benefits for institutions and students in Sub-Saharan Africa, they are particularly challenging to develop and require high levels of long-term commitment and investment.

Core principles linked to equitable partnerships, such as understanding of the local context, awareness of challenges and risks, a willingness to work collaboratively and co-create programmes, and open communication, are essential for TNE partnerships to thrive.

TNE partnerships are not the only type of international partnership that can provide educational benefits. Partnerships with broader education and/or research missions can produce positive outcomes in terms of education in a variety of ways, such as enhancing the curriculum, improving the skills of academic staff, or providing student exchange opportunities.

3.4 Impact of research partnerships

In this section, we explore whether there is evidence suggesting that international higher education partnerships of certain types and/or based on a certain model achieve greater impact than others. Furthermore, we identify practices that partnerships can take to help maximise their impact (this is in addition to good practice described above).

In this question, we consider only partnerships conducting research activities (i.e. partnerships with education activities only and partnerships focusing only on third mission are not included here). Furthermore, we consider only those partnerships where at least one partner is based in one of the four focus countries, i.e. Ghana, Kenya, Nigeria, or South Africa.

Looking at the results of our online survey launched in Ghana, Kenya, Nigeria and South Africa, Figure 26 shows the responses to a question on outcomes and impacts of various partnerships operating in the four countries, disaggregated by the country of the respondent.

The results show that some outcomes and impact have been less strong for UK partner organisations involved in international higher education research partnerships operating in Ghana, Kenya, Nigeria and South Africa. This is understandable because these South-North partnerships will have lesser impact on local communities in the UK, on innovation ecosystem in the UK and on research capacity of UK partner organisation, and these outcomes are often not expected to be delivered from South-North partnerships in the first place.

Figure 26: Research partnerships: Outcomes and impact, by country (n=48)

average score (1= not impactful at all, 6 =impactful to a very large extent)
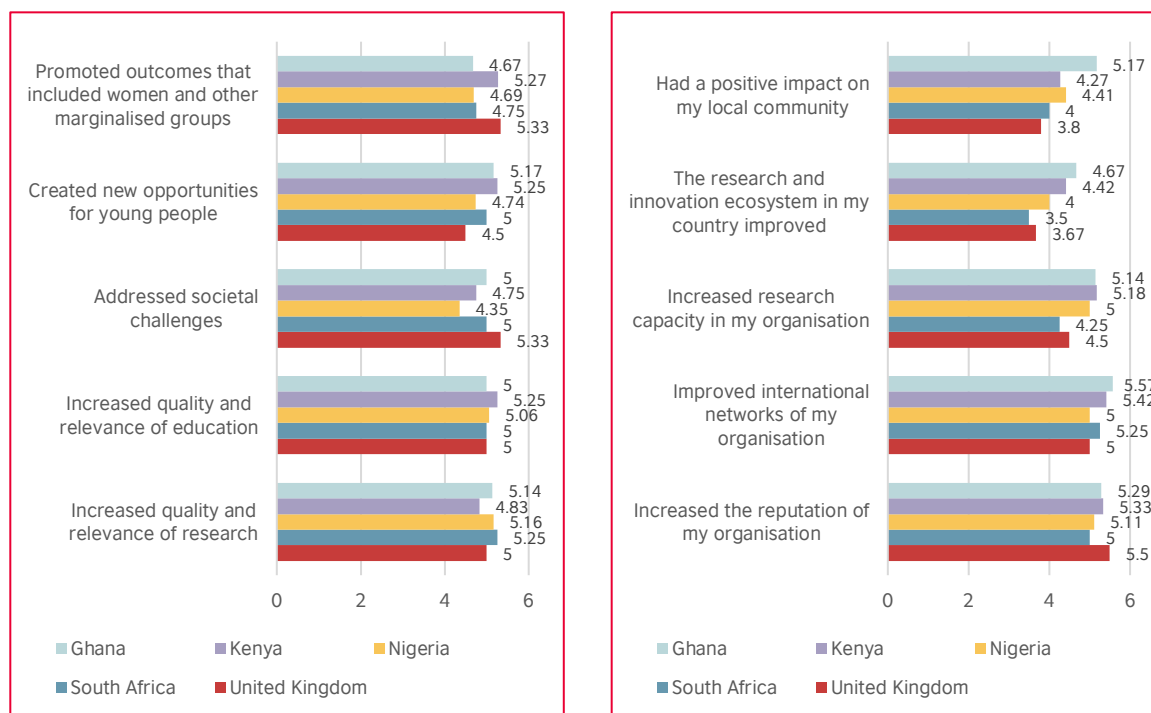
Source: Technopolis, survey results

Figure 27: Research partnerships: Outcomes and impact, by leadership

average score (1= not impactful at all, 6 =impactful to a very large extent)

Left chart:

Outcome	Led by a Global South partner	Led by a Global North partner	Leadership was shared
Promoted outcomes that included women and other marginalised groups	5.1	4.86	5
Created new opportunities for young people	5.5	4.56	5.12
Addressed societal challenges	4.3	4.87	4.94
Increased quality and relevance of education	5.4	4.82	5.4
Increased quality and relevance of research	5.2	5.24	5.24

Right chart:

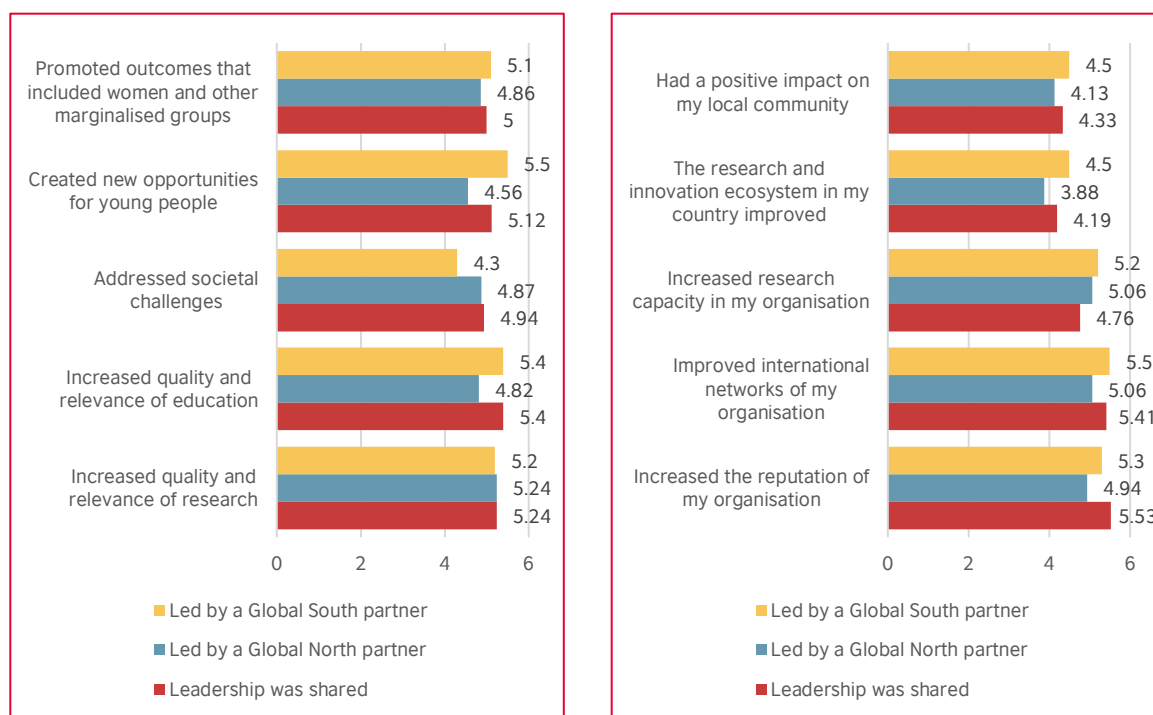| Outcome	Led by a Global South partner	Led by a Global North partner	Leadership was shared
Had a positive impact on my local community	4.5	4.13	4.33
The research and innovation ecosystem in my country improved	4.5	3.88	4.19
Increased research capacity in my organisation	5.2	5.06	4.76
Improved international networks of my organisation	5.5	5.06	5.41
Increased the reputation of my organisation	5.3	4.94	5.53

Source: Technopolis, survey results

Figure 28 shows that research partnerships composed only of higher education institutions (HEIs) tend to create slightly more and better new opportunities for young people in the four focus countries than partnerships of other compositions. Furthermore, more positive impact on quality and relevance of research is achieved by these types of partnerships. However, the differences in scores remain relatively small. Therefore, the results should be interpreted with caution.
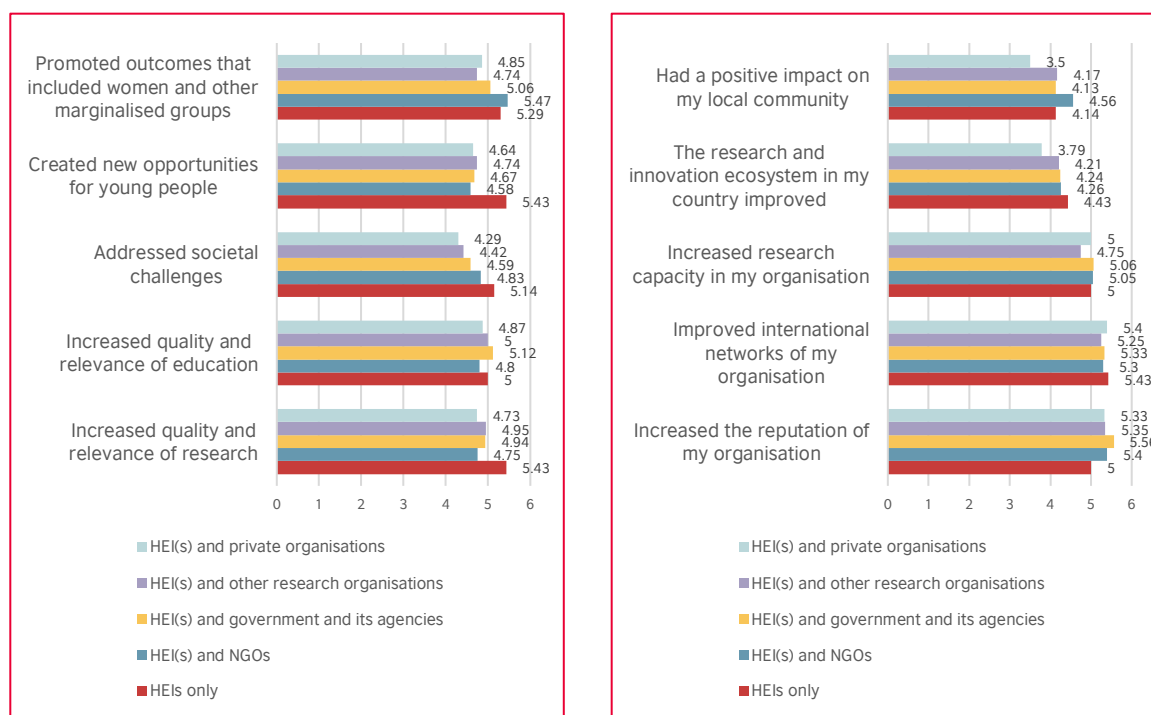
Overall, there is not enough evidence to suggest that having (or not having) different types of organisations involved in partnerships (alongside HEIs), automatically leads to significantly greater or lesser impact. This finding is in line with a conclusion above about the necessity to consider, at partnership formation, what each partner can bring to the partnership, and this should be done for each partnership, taking into account the planned activities, expected results and the context.

Nevertheless, our research shows that it is very important to involve organisations who can act as linkages to local communities and/or without whom the outputs produced by the research partnership cannot be picked up more broadly. There is evidence confirming that these organisations should be involved in the activities of the partnership as early as possible and practicable. This is also very important for sustainability and fostering a sense of ownership of partnership's results.

For example, there are partnerships where involvement of a public sector body as a full partner will be absolutely necessary to disseminate the produced outputs and promote their take up by wider communities. Conversely, there are partnerships where public sector involvement could be seen as hindrance for reaching the objectives. As another example, involving local stakeholders helps empower communities to actively engage in problem-solving, leading to more inclusive and sustainable research solutions within the research partnerships.

Figure 28: Research partnerships: Outcomes and impact, by types of partners

average score (1= not impactful at all, 6 =impactful to a very large extent)

Left chart:

Promoted outcomes that included women and other marginalised groups
- 4.85
- 4.74
- 5.06
- 5.47
- 5.29

Created new opportunities for young people
- 4.64
- 4.74
- 4.67
- 4.58
- 5.43

Addressed societal challenges
- 4.29
- 4.42
- 4.59
- 4.83
- 5.14

Increased quality and relevance of education
- 4.87
- 5
- 5.12
- 4.8
- 5

Increased quality and relevance of research
- 4.73
- 4.95
- 4.94
- 4.75
- 5.43

Right chart:

Had a positive impact on my local community
- 3.5
- 4.17
- 4.13
- 4.56
- 4.14

The research and innovation ecosystem in my country improved
- 3.79
- 4.21
- 4.24
- 4.26
- 4.43

Increased research capacity in my organisation
- 5
- 4.75
- 5.06
- 5.05
- 5

Improved international networks of my organisation
- 5.4
- 5.25
- 5.33
- 5.3
- 5.43

Increased the reputation of my organisation
- 5.33
- 5.35
- 5.56
- 5.4
- 5

Legend:
- ■ HEI(s) and private organisations
- ■ HEI(s) and other research organisations
- ■ HEI(s) and government and its agencies
- ■ HEI(s) and NGOs
- ■ HEIs only

Source: Technopolis, survey results

Addressing societal challenges by partnerships to achieve major impact

Our research shows that international higher education partnerships are increasingly concerned with addressing societal challenges, locally, regionally, nationally, and also globally. The focus on societal challenges is centred around addressing the UN 17 Sustainable Development Goals, adopted as part of the Sustainable Agenda 2030. This approach requires engagement of many stakeholders and solutions have to be holistic. Partnerships that wish to address societal challenges and/or make positive contributions to the UN SDGs should have the societal challenge as their ultimate goal (formulated as impact statements in Theories of Change).

Societal challenges require multi-disciplinary approaches and involvement of various stakeholders who cooperate around the same goal. Given that the most important societal challenges of today affect multiple countries, continents or even the whole globe, international approaches are required.

International higher education partnerships are a natural response to this, in particular when bringing communities and other stakeholders on board. This, in turn, creates ownership in the partners and the feeling of mutual responsibility for the outcomes, and leads to a significant impact at various levels.

"There has been a lot of benefit in terms of facilitating training, and capacity building for researchers, networking and linking of the researchers with the local community through the share of expertise or knowledge or skills in terms of their daily lives."

HE stakeholder, Kenya

There is also a rich body of evidence demonstrating that the relationships among the partner organisations should be institutionalised as much as possible.

> **"Institutionalizing partnerships also increases their sustainability in the long term, both in terms of securing ongoing funding and leveraging diverse expertise to apply for international grants and engage in various collaborative initiatives."**
>
> HE stakeholder, South Africa

There are a number of examples of partnerships which were unsuccessful or faced significant challenges because the linkages among partners were dependent on personal relationships only. In these cases, a person leaving a partner organisation or changing their role within the organisation may bring the partnership to a crisis. For example, involving PhD students and/or early-career researchers has proved to be one of the ways in which a pipeline of prospective academics helps make an international research partnership more institutionalised

> **"Collaborating with partners from the Global North offers significant value, particularly for early-career researchers in Africa. These partnerships provide exposure to higher standards of scholarship, advanced research infrastructure, and a broader professional network."**
>
> HE stakeholder, South Africa

Building capacity in research management and support

Sufficient administrative support and "back office" functions within partner organisations are crucial to maximise partnerships' impact. These functions are not only important for the lead partner, but also for other partners, because the administrative function provides support with organising events and travels for individuals working on partnership activities, as well as support with reporting and monitoring requirements (e.g. for funders of the partnership).

Further support for the partnership should come from central university international offices, research collaboration offices etc., particularly at the beginning of the process, to help identify funding opportunities, broker relationships with partners, and with other tasks.

In our research, we have come across a number of partnerships where partners, particularly those in the Global South, did not have the necessary levels of administrative support, which has often resulted in researchers and academics themselves investing their time to administration, rather than core partnership tasks. This need for administrative capacity within each partner organisation should be recognised by funders who can make sure that administrative costs are eligible for reimbursement within the funding rules.

Implementing a good monitoring system at the partnership level, capturing the achievements and results of the partnership, and introducing impact tracking mechanisms are also indispensable for maximising impact. Tools, such as logframes and result frameworks, as well as appointing monitoring & evaluation officers within partnerships (or at a programme level in case individual partnerships and projects are relatively small), are important for monitoring and impact tracking. Yet, this does not appear to be a common practice for many partnerships operating in Sub-Saharan Africa.

> **"We may lack capacity in some areas in terms of doing very good quality monitoring and evaluation. Especially in evaluating impact as opposed to evaluating whether the money was all spent. There is a need for a lot of capacity building in the area of monitoring and evaluation and that is monitoring and evaluation for improvement, not for looking for faults and punishing people."**
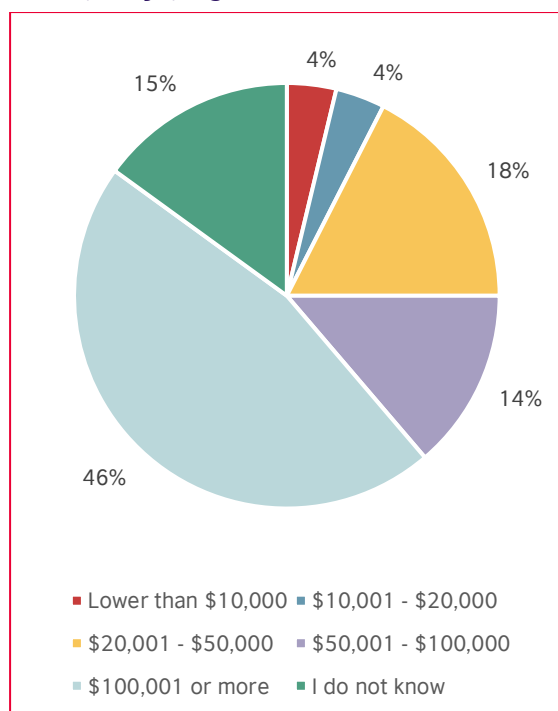>
> HE stakeholder, Kenya

3.4.1 What are the most cost-effective partnership models?

In this section, we focus on identifying specific partnership models, or individual aspects of these models, which prove to be particularly cost-effective. It was not possible to conduct a quantitative cost-effectiveness analysis, which would have required an in-depth analysis of budgets of a number of individual partnerships, which was out of scope of this study. We, therefore, use proxies for comparing the cost-effectiveness of different partnership models.

High degree of variability of budgets

International higher education partnerships receive budgets whose sizes vary significantly. The survey results show[38] that grant amounts lower than $20,000 (or equivalents) are not very common (only 8% in the survey). Approximately one third of the partnerships operated with budgets between $20,001 and $100,000, and 46% with budgets over $100,000 (Figure 29).

Figure 29: Budgets for research partnerships in Ghana, Kenya, Nigeria and South Africa (n=65)

- Lower than $10,000
- $10,001 - $20,000
- $20,001 - $50,000
- $50,001 - $100,000
- $100,001 or more
- I do not know

Source: Technopolis, survey results

Sound financial management with limited resources

Budget is not the only criterion for assessing partnership cost-effectiveness.

This includes the number of partners, the scope of activities ,produced outputs and outcomes, price levels in the countries of operation, and the duration of partnerships.

Across all four countries, financial resources available for international higher education partnerships are limited. Interviewees agreed that universities lack adequate human resource capacities to manage international partnerships, because academic staff are often overloaded. Nevertheless, most of the interviewed organisations still see a significant value in pursuing more international collaboration, and will do so in the future.

Cost-effectiveness, adaptive and good management is essential in order to make international partnership successful in this environment of financial pressures.

Organisations interested in partnering, especially those in the Global South, should be strategic in their choice of partners, and in their choice of funding opportunities. International and national funders and donors adopt very different approaches and have different priorities, which manifests in funding opportunities with varied budgets, focus etc.

> **"The issue is mainly about funding... generally speaking, African HEIs are weak. It is the responsibility of the institutions to bring themselves to up to where they will be able to leverage on existing opportunities."**
>
> HE stakeholder, Ghana

Partner organisations have to take into consideration their own needs, context, the attractiveness and relevance of each opportunity. These are crucial points for discussion before a partnership is conceived.

---

[38] It is important to note that the survey does not aim to be representative of the entire international higher education partnership landscapes in the four countries.

Sound financial management of partnership's resources implemented by partners is another factor affecting the cost-effectiveness of partnerships.

It is a good practice to establish a monitoring committee internally within each partner organisation overseeing the work of the partnership manager (e.g. an academic/researcher).

The partnership's funds should be managed centrally, using university's central financial systems, and not released directly to individuals or teams working on the partnership. This ensures high accountability standards and rigorous financial oversight. Table 4 lists a number of approaches that partnerships may consider adopting to increase their cost-effectiveness.

Table 4: Approaches to increase the cost-effectiveness of international HE partnerships

| Approaches to increase cost-effectiveness	Advantages	Disadvantages
Use of digital platforms and software solutions for partnership meetings, staff and student exchanges etc.	• Significant reduction of travel costs • Reduction of a need for physical infrastructure to facilitate meetings, visit, exchange stays etc. • Scalability and flexibility • Global exposure for students	• Cost of digital platforms and digital infrastructure • Time zone differences
Pooling partnership resources	• Division of labour • Synergies • Avoiding duplicities • Economies of scale (e.g. negotiating lower costs for technology or services) • Leverage of external funding	• Coordination complexities • Differences in organisational structures
Sharing research equipment and research infrastructure, and facilities (e.g. libraries)	• Enhanced research output • Shared costs of equipment and facilities • Collaborative expertise • Effective for smaller partners who cannot afford to invest in technology or facilities on their own	• Differences in academic calendars • Coordination complexities • Scheduling conflicts • Equitable access to resources • Intellectual property concerns
Transnational education: Overseas campuses	• Sharing operational costs with local partners • Tapping into local markets for students and resources • International brand expansion	• Initial setup costs • Regulatory hurdles • Maintaining academic quality

Reducing financial and project risks and increasing the prospects of future funding

Reduction of financial and project risks for partners can be considered a positive step towards cost-effectiveness, because financial risks can potentially lead to increased costs on the side of partners, and therefore reduced cost-effectiveness. The survey results in Figure 30 demonstrate that, across the board, there is a high level of consensus that working in a partnership reduces the financial and/or project risk for each partner.

When disaggregated by the different leadership models, it is apparent that partnerships where the lead role is shared between Southern and Northern partners tend to mitigate the risks slightly better than other partnerships. The level of agreement was comparatively lower within partners on Southern-led partnerships, which is an interesting finding, particularly when compared with our conclusions on equity and the trends towards empowering Global South partners to take a lead role (see Section 3.1). This means that encouraging Southern partners to take a lead role on partnership should be complemented with opportunities to build capacity in financial risk management.Figure 31 shows that financial risks are best mitigated on partnerships with a

government and/or its agency on board as a partner. This perhaps does not come as a surprise because government/agencies are generally perceived as lower-risk partners, compared to other types of partners.

Figure 30: Reduction of financial risk, by leadership (n=61)
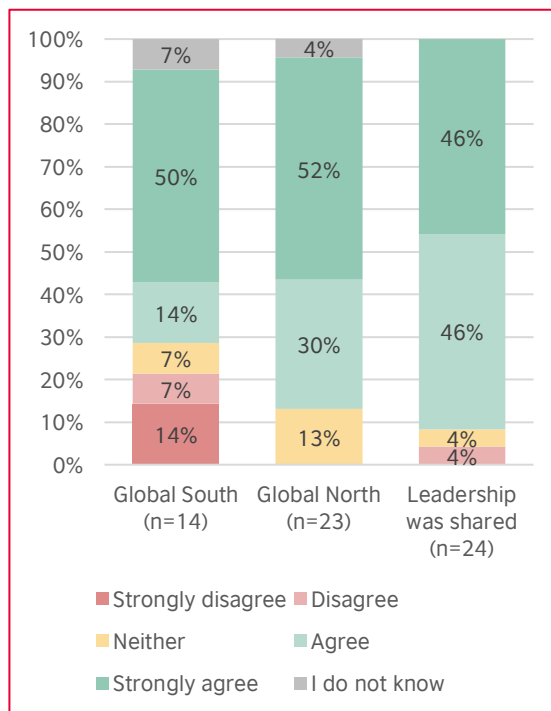
Source: Technopolis, survey results

Figure 31: Reduction of financial risk, by partnership composition (n=50)
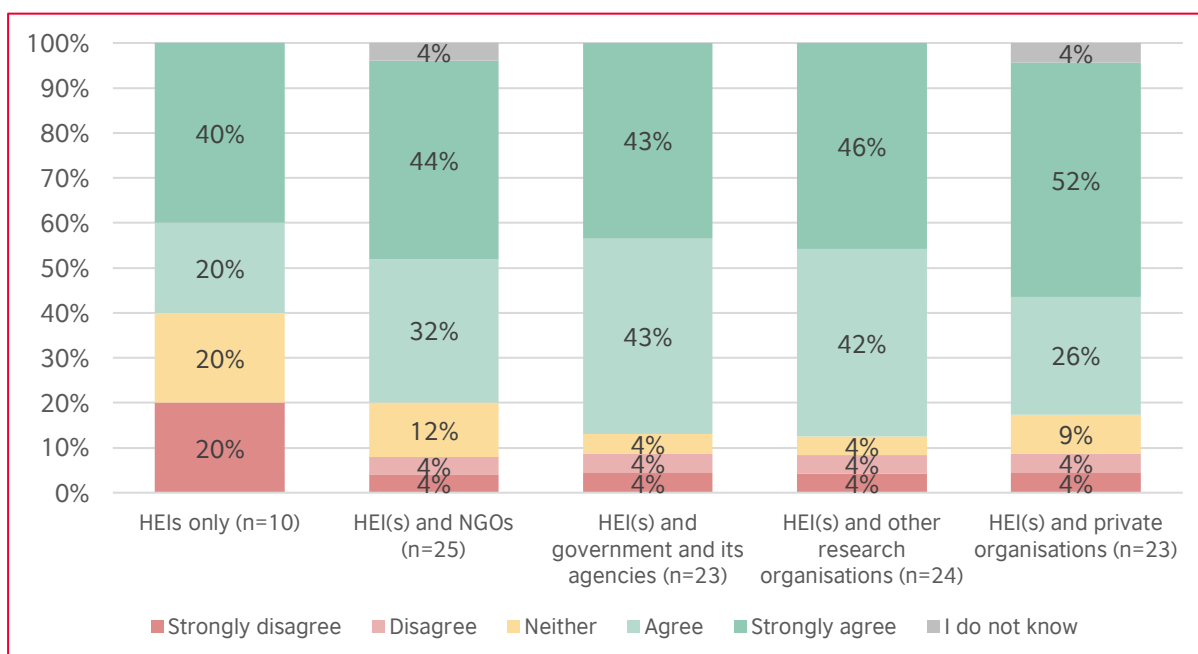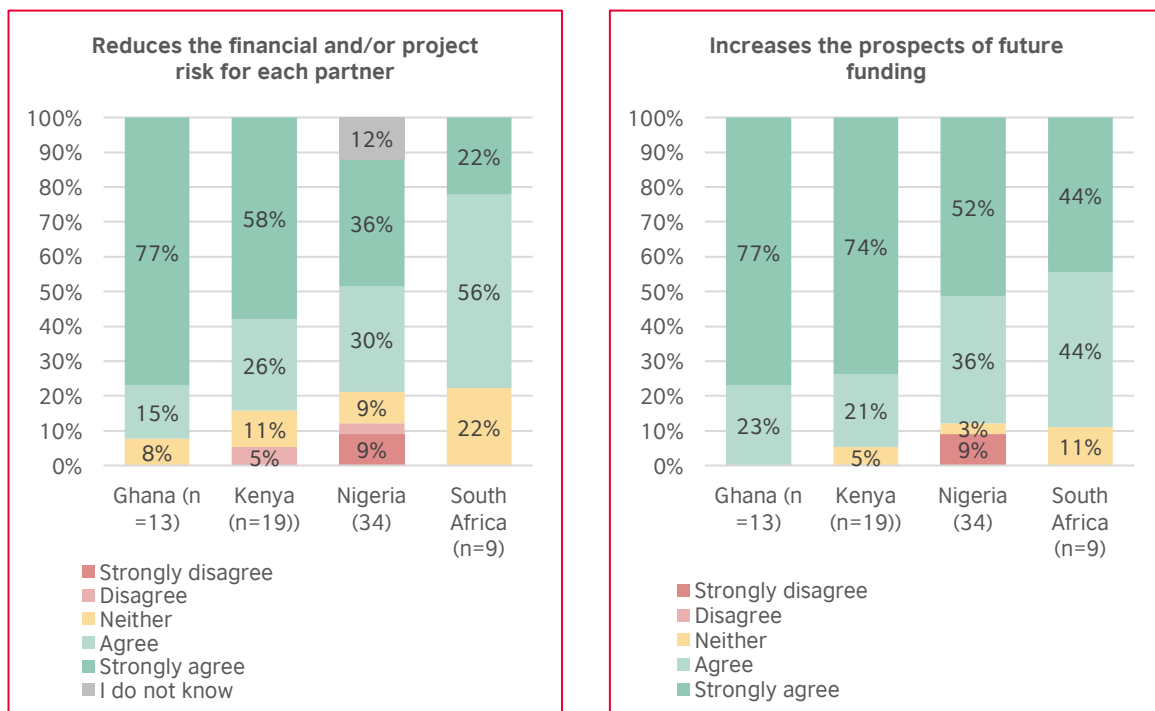

Source: Technopolis, survey results

Partnership fund-raising ability is another proxy for assessing the cost-effectiveness of different partnership models. Overwhelmingly, our survey respondents agreed that, regardless of partnership model, working in a partnership increases the prospects of future funding, as opposed to working as a single organisation. Across all respondents 33% agreed and 64% strongly agreed that partnerships increase future funding prospects. Again, partners on Southern-led partnerships felt these prospects were slightly lower than partnerships with different leadership models, with 36% agreeing and 57% strongly agreeing.

Figure 32 illustrates the summary of responses to both questions disaggregated by country. Partners based in Ghana were the most optimistic about risk mitigation and future funding prospects. Partners in Nigeria were least optimistic about partnership models leading to financial risk reduction, as well as to better funding opportunities in the future.

Figure 32: Partnership risk reduction and fundraising potential, by country
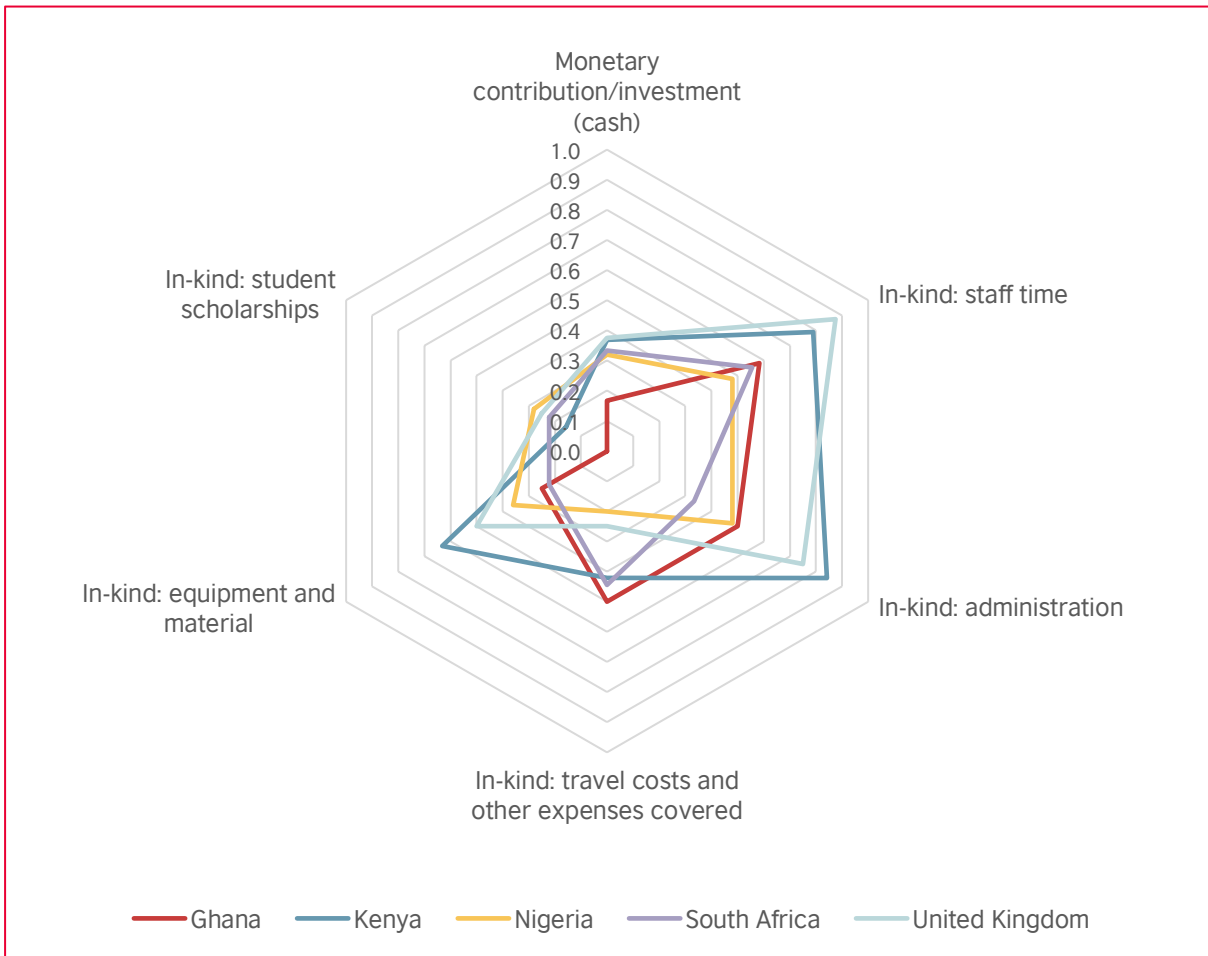

Source: Technopolis, survey results

In the survey, we also asked partners to indicate what additional contribution and/or investment to their partnerships they have made. These are not necessarily direct indicators of cost-effectiveness, nevertheless, they help make the cost associated with partnerships more transparent. **Figure** 33 shows that **staff time and administration are the most frequent additional investments from partners across all four countries.** However, the intensity varies across the countries.

Whilst around 80% of Kenyan partners responding to the survey reported that they had either provided staff time or administrative support to their partnerships, only 48% Nigerian partners did so. Other types of contribution, such as monetary, provision of equipment, material, travel costs, and premises, venues etc. appear to be less frequent. When disaggregated by leadership models, no significant differences can be identified.

Figure 33: Additional contribution / investment made by partners (n=73)

Source: Technopolis, survey results

4 Implications

International higher educational partnerships play a significant role in the internationalisation of HE, whether in research, teaching or third mission. The research demonstrates that international higher education partnerships are perceived by stakeholders in Sub-Saharan Africa as creating opportunities for outcomes and impact that could not be achieved by working alone or with local /national actors.

Increased interest in equitable partnerships is being reflected in greater attention being paid to equity, mutual benefits and sustainability on both a system level (i.e. at the level of governments and funders). Based on feedback from stakeholders in Sub-Saharan Africa, progress is being made in making partnerships more equitable, and there are many examples of good practice, but there are still barriers and challenges that need to be tackled by different actors. This section highlights the implications for the British Council and other funders; implications for HEIs in the UK and Global North; and implications for HEIs and organisations in Africa.

4.1 Implications for the British Council and other funders

- **Actively and visibly involving African experts in setting research agendas.** While funders are more mindful of the need to develop their programmes with regional needs in mind, stakeholders reported that they still felt that African voices were not being heard when it came to setting priorities at a programme level.

- **Providing African partners with more opportunities to lead.** Stakeholders reported that African institutions have more opportunities to set the agenda for partnerships than in the past, but reported barriers to meeting funders requirements to be the lead partner. A crucial step towards making collaborations more equitable will be to increase the number of partnerships led

by African institutions. Funders needs to reflect on how to best support HEIs to increase their capacity in areas such as administration and research management, to improve their ability to meet funding requirements.

- **Ensuring that sustainability is built into partnerships from the start.** Many partners still do not discuss their plans for what will happen when grant funding ends. Asking partners to reflect how they intend to sustain the results and impact of their projects at the grant application stage should encourage greater reflection the goals of the partnership beyond the funding period.

- **Reflecting on the feasibility of providing longer-term support.** Longer-term partnerships are often more equitable, as partners build trust and understanding over time. Whereas there is a higher risk that short-term partnerships, formed quickly for grant-funding are more likely to be transactional and superficial. Although many stakeholders reported that they managed to sustain aspects of partnerships without external funding, longer-term funding may help to achieve positive outcomes related to equity and sustainability.

- **Supporting a variety of partnership types.** Although the study demonstrated that a wide variety of partnerships can be found in Ghana, Kenya, Nigeria and South Africa, research partnerships are still seen as the most typical type of partnership and, in many ways, the best understood by both funders and stakeholders. Education and third mission activities also have an important role to play in the international partnership landscape, and provide a range of different opportunities to have outcomes and impacts that drive progress towards the SDGs, improving lives in Africa.

- **Building on existing knowledge and guidance.** A number of organisations in the Global North and Africa have produced robust research, guidance and toolkits to support equitable partnerships. To avoid duplication of effort, the British Council and other funders should maximise opportunities to draw on existing work and develop more targeted research and resources that address gaps and are tailored to different types of partnership and/or stakeholder groups. Alongside this, efforts should be made to share existing work as widely as possible, to increase their visibility for other funders and stakeholders.

4.2   Implications for HEIs in the Global North

- **Taking an active role in building equity into partnerships.** Partners located in the Global North, including HEIs in the UK, often hold considerable power in partnerships and need to adopt proactive approaches to ensuring that collaborations with African partners are equitable. There are various resources available to support HEIs from the Global North in working collaboratively with their partners to improve equity.

- **Seeing African partners as co-creators and valuing their expertise**. While considerable progress has been made in involving African partners in the design of projects, there are still instances where African teams' involvement in setting agendas and participating in a range of roles is limited. Partnerships offer considerable opportunities for all partners to maximise the impact of their work by complementing each other's expertise.

- **Improving understanding of the contexts of African partners.** Dedicating time and effort to understanding the contexts in which African partners work is crucial to making partnerships more equitable. Where partners face challenges relating to capacity, reflect on how they can be supported to work towards addressing these difficulties.

It is also important to reflect on cultural assumptions and develop ways to work that accommodate cultural and linguistic differences.

- **Ensuring that benefits are shared between partners.** All partners need to be clear about their motivations and what they wish to get from a partnership. Benefits do not necessarily have to be the same for all partners, but there should be a consensus on what is fair in the context of the partnership. Research partnerships, for example, carry risks of benefits (e.g. involvement in publications) not being shared across partners. Partners in Africa may have additional needs that have to be met, in order to them to access benefits fully.

- **Considering different partners and partnership types.** For institutions in the Global North, particularly the UK, there are strong incentives to focus primarily on research partnerships with African HEIs with established global reputations. Adopting a broader scope when identifying potential partners and partnership types will not only increase equity of access to opportunities for HEIs, NGOs and other organisations in Africa, but also has considerable potential to unlock new opportunities and encourage innovation, as well as broadening impact.

4.3 Implications for HEIs and other partners in Africa

- **Communicating potential to contribute to partnerships.** Institutions and organisations in Africa need to emphasise the knowledge and expertise that they have the potential to contribute to a partnership, while being open and honest about any needs or capacity challenges. Equitable partnerships are collaborative and not based on the assumption that partners from the Global North are "teaching" their African partners.

- **Taking a pro-active role in the management of partnerships.** Partners in Africa should be confident to express their willingness and determination to lead, or co-lead, North-South partnerships. This is crucial for making sure the partnership is equitable, generates benefits for all partners, and remains relevant for the communities in which African partners operate.

- **Involving communities in the work of the partnership.** Organisations who can act as linkages to local communities and/or without whom the outputs produced by the research partnership cannot be picked up more broadly, should be involved in the partnership. Higher education partners should consider involving local (non-university) partners in the activities of the partnership as early as possible and practicable. This is also very important for sustainability and fostering a sense of ownership of partnership's results.

- **Developing realistic approaches to costing and budgeting partnerships.** The research suggests that African organisations tend to underestimate the costs of being involved in a partnership. While it can be challenging to develop systems for estimating costs, when administrative capacity is limited, funding shortfalls can put financial pressure on all partners and strain the relationship. Work closely with partners to develop realistic budgets for all activities and aspects of the partnership, including the necessary administrative function, monitoring areas where capacity needs to be built, as far as funding conditions allow.

- **Reflecting on how partnerships can support institutional goals.** Participating in partnerships can create opportunities to make progress towards wider institutional objectives. Stakeholders in Africa reported a range of longer-term benefits from partnerships, such as increased investment in facilities, improved infrastructure, better teaching, and increased opportunities for staff. It is crucial to approach partnerships strategically and think about how they can be leveraged to maximise institutional benefits.

- **Institutionalising the partnership.** The relationships among the partner organisations should be institutionalised as much as possible. There are a number of examples of partnerships which were unsuccessful or faced significant challenges because the linkages among partners were dependent on personal relationships only.

Appendix 1: Survey Demographics

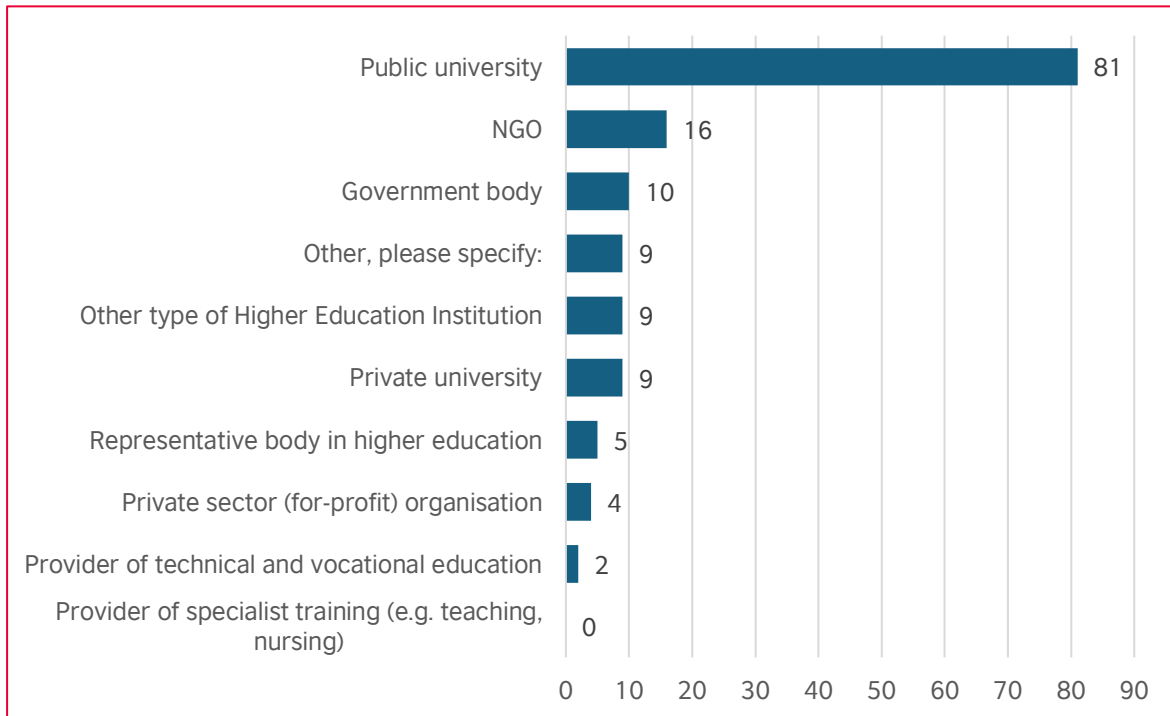**Figure 34: What type of organisation do you represent? (n=145)**

Organisation type	Count
Public university	81
NGO	16
Government body	10
Other, please specify:	9
Other type of Higher Education Institution	9
Private university	9
Representative body in higher education	5
Private sector (for-profit) organisation	4
Provider of technical and vocational education	2
Provider of specialist training (e.g. teaching, nursing)	0

Figure 35: In which country is your organisation based? (n=145)

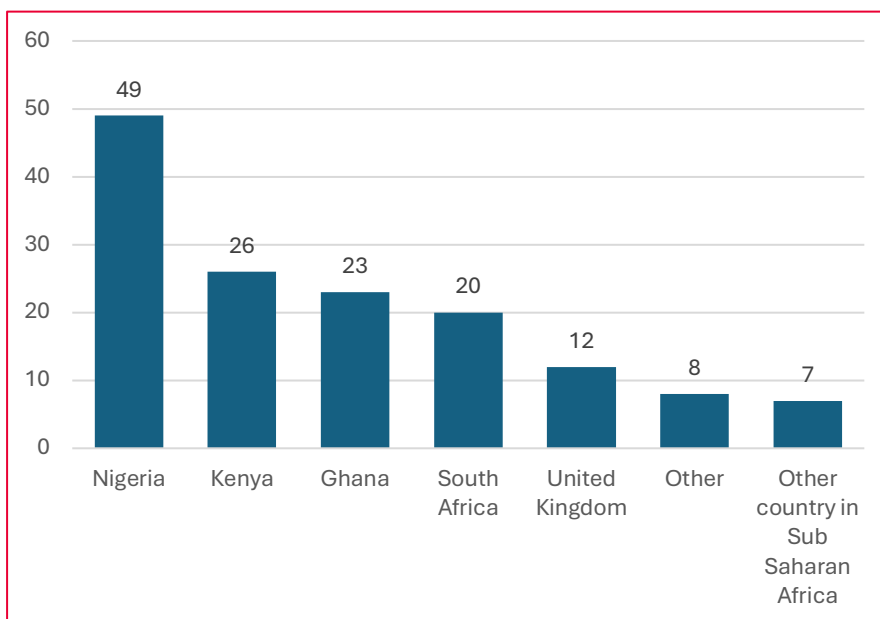| Country	Count
Nigeria	49
Kenya	26
Ghana	23
South Africa	20
United Kingdom	12
Other	8
Other country in Sub Saharan Africa	7

Figure 36: Which of the following best describes your current role? (n=145)
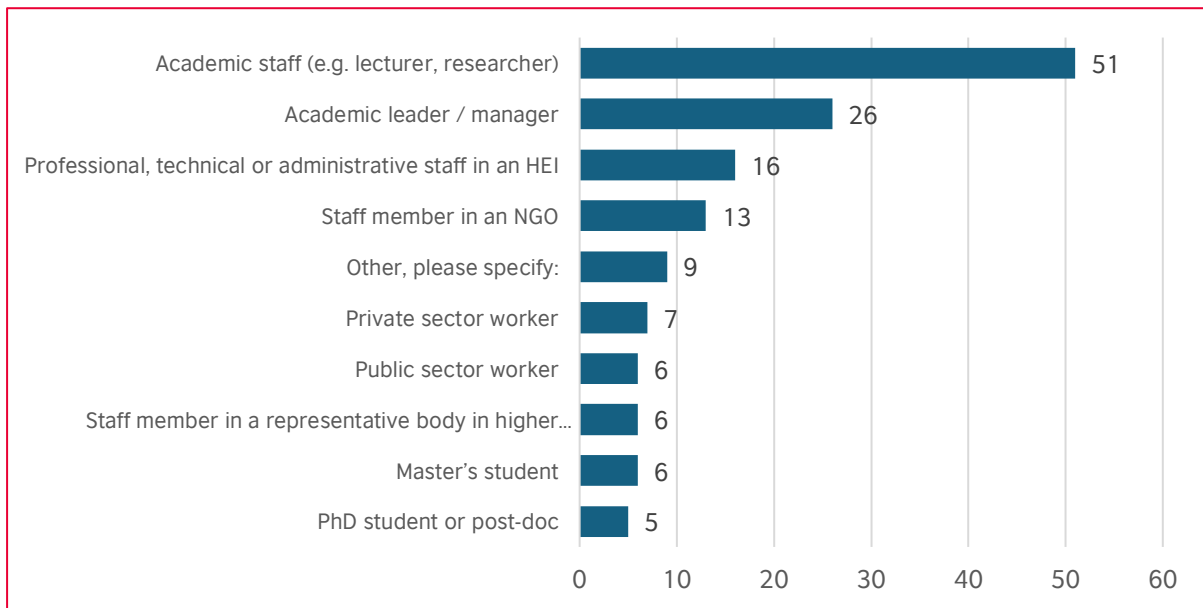

Figure 37: Which of the following best describes your experience of international partnerships? (n=145)
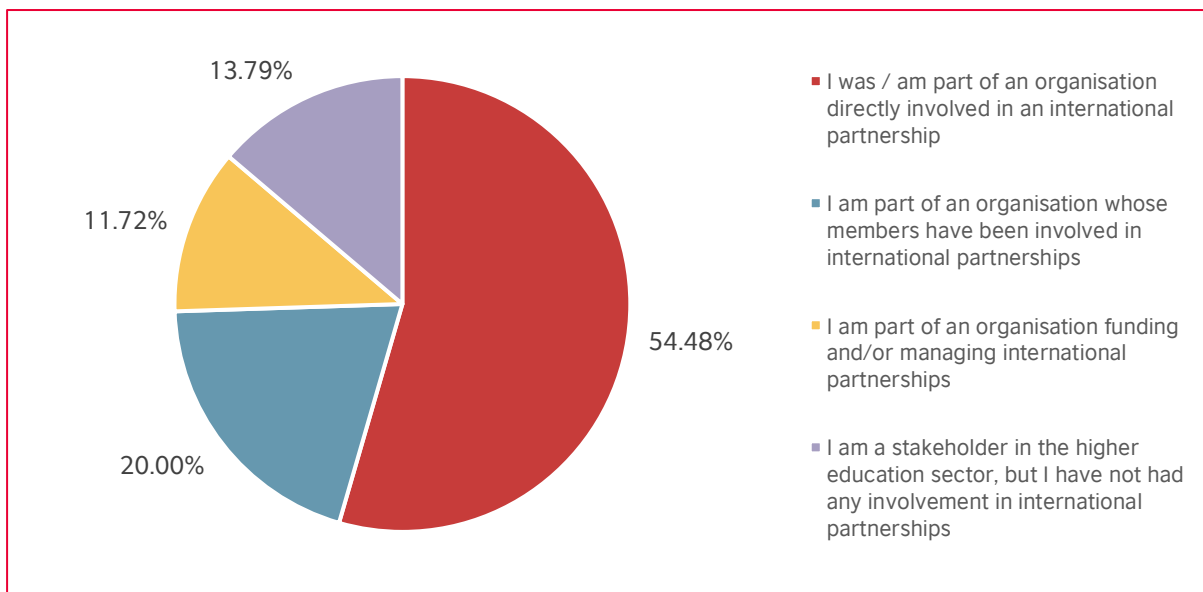
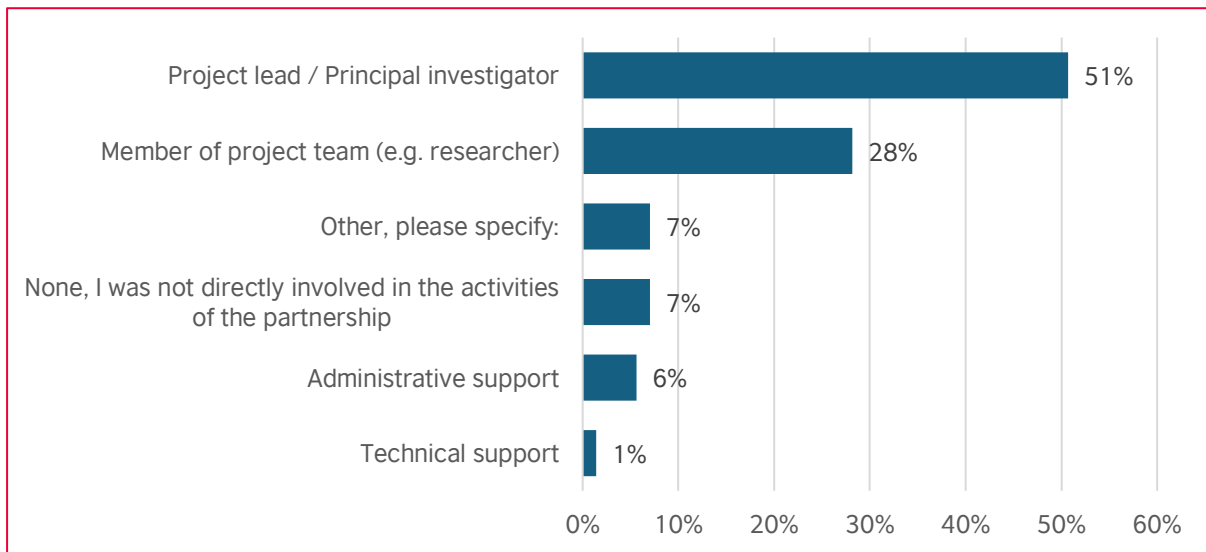**Figure 38: What was your role in the partnership? (n=71)**

Role	%
Project lead / Principal investigator	51%
Member of project team (e.g. researcher)	28%
Other, please specify:	7%
None, I was not directly involved in the activities of the partnership	7%
Administrative support	6%
Technical support	1%

Figure 39: What types of partner were involved? Please select all that apply (n=80)

Type	%
HEI(s) and other research organisations	38%
HEI(s) and NGOs	36%
HEI(s) and government and its agencies	33%
HEI(s) and private organisations	31%
HEIs only	14%
Other, please specify:	3%
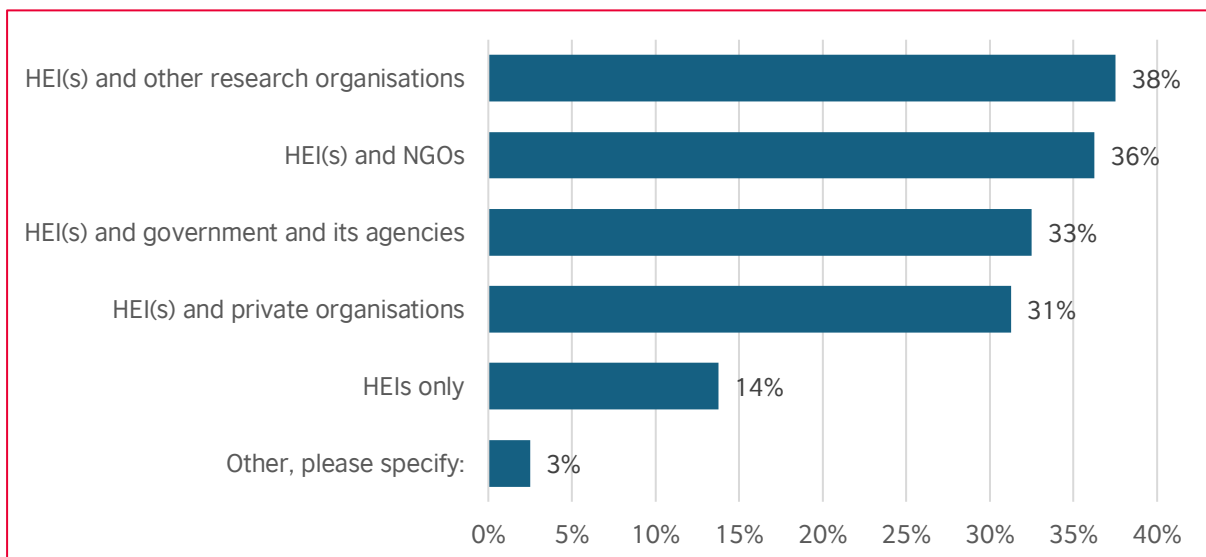
Figure 40: Where was the lead partner based? (n=80)

- Global North: 33.75%
- Leadership was shared: 33.75%
- Global South: 18.75%
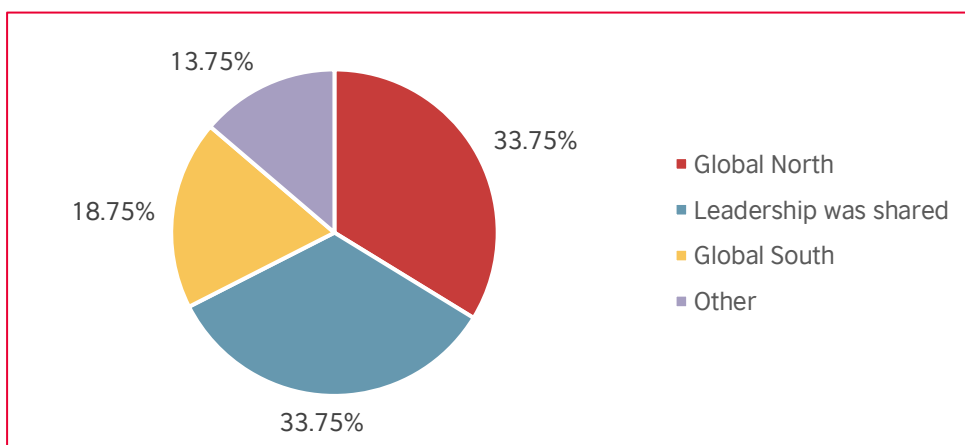- Other: 13.75%

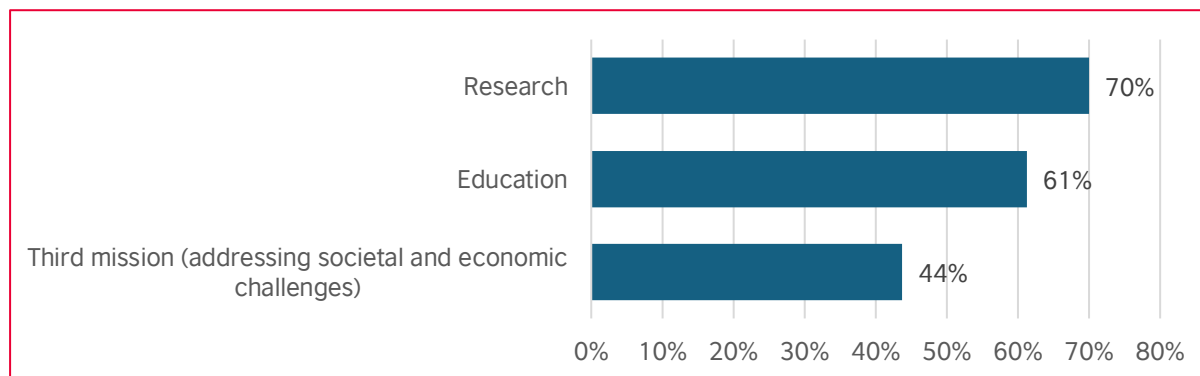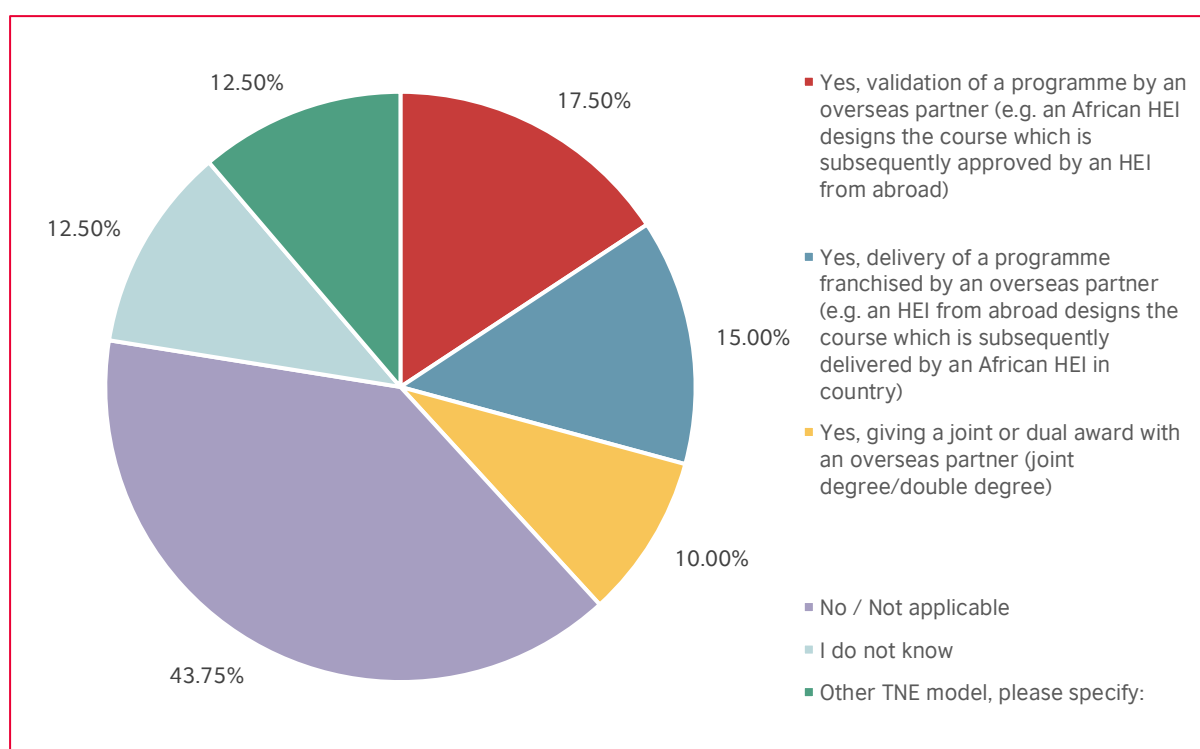**Figure 41: What was the focus of the partnership? Please select all that apply (n=80)**

Figure 42: Did the partnership(s) include the development or delivery of Transnational Education (TNE)?

Appendix 2: List of Interviewees

Ghana

Name	Organisation	Role
Frederic Ato Armah	University of Cape Coast	Director of Research and Programmes
Ransford Bekoe	Association of African Universities, Ghana	Partnerships Manager
Kingsford Kissi Mireku	Central University, Ghana	Head, International Programmes Office
Robert Kobla Abbah	Sharing Education, Ghana	Director and Principal
George Obeng-Adjei	University of Ghana	BSU3 Coordinator
Sampson Oduro-Kwarteng	Kwame Nkrumah University of Science and Technology, Ghana	Coordinator, Regional Water and Environmental Sanitation Centre Kumasi

Kenya

Name	Organisation	Role
Hendrina Doroba	African Development Bank, Kenya	Division Manager-Education and Skills Development
Robert Gateru	Riara University, Kenya	Vice Chancellor
Mary Kiguru	Education for All Children, Kenya	Director, Strategic Partners and Business Development
Simeon Mining	Moi University, Kenya	Professor of Immunology
Maurice Okoth	East African Higher Education Quality Assurance Network, Kenya	Vice-President
Abigael Otinga	University of Eldoret	Project Coordinator

Nigeria

Name	Organisation	Role
Omobolanle Ade-Ademilua	University of Lagos, Nigeria	Centre Leader, African Centre Of Excellence for Drug Research, Herbal Medicine Development and Regulatory Science
Olubola Babalola	Obafemi Awolowo University, Nigeria	Professor of Quantity Surveying
Iheanacho Chukwuemeka Metuonu	University of Medical Sciences, Nigeria	Associate Professor
Chikelue Ofuebe	University of Nigeria	Director of International Collaboration
Emeka Oguzie	Federal University of Technology Owerri, Nigeria	Deputy Vice Chancellor
Wale Samuel	Education Development Center, Nigeria	USAID LTLGP Africa Hub Coordinator

South Africa

Name	Organisation	Role
Samia Chasi	International Education Association of South Africa	Manager, Strategic Initiatives, Partnership Development and Research
Farai Kap	University of Pretoria, South Africa	Lead for Strategic International Partnerships
Zakheleni Palane Dube	University of Mpumalanga, South Africa	Senior Lecturer, Agricultural Sciences
Lavern Samuels	South African Nordic Centre	Chair
Chika Sehoole	African Network for Internationalization of Education (ANIE) / University of Pretoria, South Africa	Board Member / Dean of the Faculty of Education
Victor Wepener	North-West University, South Africa	Professor and co-leader of the Water Research Group

United Kingdom and the Global North

Name	Organisation	Role
Isabella Aboderin	University of Bristol, UK	Perivoli Chair in Africa Research and Partnerships
William Bramwell	Association of Commonwealth Universities (ACU)	Senior Policy and Networks Manager
Susanna Comody	British Council, UK	Head of Business Development, Global Partnerships and Innovation – Higher Education and Science
Brenda Giles	British Council, UK	Programme Director, Going Global Partnerships
Richard Grubb	Department for Business and Trade, UK	Lead for Africa, Europe, and International Education Strategy
Ian Hall	Advance HE, UK	Head of Membership (International)
Jon Harle	INASP, Berlin	Executive Director
Maggy Heintz	UK Collaborative Research Development	Executive Director
Paul Jones	Swansea University, UK	Professor of Entrepreneurship and Innovation Swansea University
Marc Kochzius	Vrije Universiteit Brussel, Belgium	Professor in Marine Biology
Beate Knight	Association of Commonwealth Universities (ACU)	Head of Programmes
Michael Peak	British Council, UK	Head of Education Research