

# The Notion of Relevance in Academic Collaboration: From Setting Objectives to Targeting Development Goals

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## **Abstract**

This article examines the notion of relevance in academic collaboration between North and South partners. It traces the history and nature of academic cooperation, and the major factors that determine the success of partnerships. It is argued that equitable, collaborative agenda setting, clear decision-making procedures, and consideration of the developmental goals that are the envisaged outcome of collaboration schemes are mechanisms that can be used to address issues of relevance. Failure to address relevance concerns could result in academics or institutions being diverted from addressing local or national priority areas. In turn, this could result in the relevance of the cooperation itself being questioned.

## **Résumé**

Cet article interroge la notion de pertinence dans la collaboration académique entre partenaires Nord et Sud. Il retrace l'histoire et la nature de la coopération universitaire, ainsi que les principaux facteurs qui déterminent le succès des partenariats. Il est soutenu que l'établissement d'un programme équitable et collaboratif, des procédures de prise de décision claires et la prise en compte des objectifs de développement qui sont le résultat envisagé des programmes de collaboration sont des mécanismes qui peuvent être utilisés pour résoudre les problèmes pertinents. Le fait de ne pas répondre aux préoccupations liées à la pertinence pourrait détourner les universitaires ou les institutions de s'occuper des domaines prioritaires locaux ou nationaux. Cela pourrait à son tour remettre en question la pertinence de la coopération elle-même.

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## Introduction

Collaboration occurs “when a group of autonomous stakeholders of a problem domain engage in an interactive process, using shared rules, norms and structures to act or decide on issues related to that domain” (Wood, 1991, p. 146). Partnerships have “powerful potential” to address multi-faceted challenges and offer reciprocal benefits and mutual rewards to the parties involved (Downes, 2013). The benefits of academic collaborations include developing research capacity, enhancing institutional status and competitiveness, improving overall systems and instructional practice, professional development and learning, and enhanced academic exposure (Bradley, 2008; Hanada, 2021).

Beyond their institutional or national significance, collaborative schemes are also recognised in international commitments such as the United Nations Millennium Development Goals (Goal 8) and Sustainable Development Goals (SDG17) which highlight their importance in enhancing sustainable development. Although collaboration is recognised as an effective means of addressing multifaceted issues in diverse fields of study, success is difficult to achieve (Marek, Brock, and Savla, 2015). Partnerships between institutions in the Global North and the Global South are affected by an interplay of many factors. Their philanthropic and paternalistic nature, the hegemonic role of a Western educational discourse, the lopsided relationship between the North and South, and the different institutional objectives the two worlds pursue as well as their divergent norms and institutional logics have often been serious obstacles in establishing effective partnerships (Bradley, 2008; Breidlid, 2013; Carbonnier and Kontinen, 2015).

Success in this regard calls for an examination of existing patterns of engagement and for concerns that inhibit effectiveness and efficiency to be addressed. Unless they are properly designed and pursued, new and promising mechanisms for academic collaboration may be no different from the former paternalistic relationships which are often blamed for excessive dependence on the North. Partnerships that focus on external support to the Global South are often accused of perpetuating dependence, and, in turn, poverty (Eshuchi, 2009; Carbonnier and Kontinen, 2015). Although diverse motivations and circumstances might underpin a collaborative arrangement between or among institutions, the issue of relevance is one of the most serious impediments or factors contributing to success in collaborative ventures.

This article examines the notion of relevance in collaboration, particularly from the perspective of Southern partners. It highlights relevance in the context of academic collaboration and the mechanisms by which collaborating parties seek to ensure that they gain from the partnership without compromising their bargaining power and benefits.

The article is presented in five sections. The first discusses the methodology employed, followed by a review of related literature and an analysis of the two major components of academic cooperation whose design incorporates elements of relevance. Section four addresses the issue of relevance, followed by a conclusion.

## Methodology

A qualitative study was conducted based on a desk review of available literature. Relevant theoretical conceptualisations and practical experiences were investigated by bringing together a diverse range of conceptual and empirical research from multiple viewpoints with particular emphasis on the Global South and higher education institutions located in this region. The data were analysed using thematic content analysis and inductive reasoning. The four common steps of content analysis, decontextualisation, recontextualisation, categorisation, and compilation were employed to arrive at the final outcome (Bengtsson, 2016).

## The nature and features of academic collaboration: review of related literature

Scientific cooperation between the Global North and the Global South has a long history. Rosseel, De Corte, Blommaert, and Verniers (2009) note that the importance of development cooperation was recognised in the late 1940s after World War II, when the Marshall Plan was launched to assist European countries to reconstruct their devastated economies. In terms of developing countries, the United States (US) is credited for taking the lead in promoting cooperation with ‘Point four’ of President Truman’s 1949 ‘Bold New Program’ which is regarded as the starting point of modern development cooperation (Rosseel et al., 2009). While the period from the 1940s to the early 1960s is regarded as the heyday of bilateral relations, the early 1960s to mid-1970s saw significant growth in multilateral development assistance which involved financing by a large number of states. Since the 1990s, partnerships have been the

most common framework for multilateral scientific research and for development assistance between the North and developing countries (Obamwa and Mwewa, 2009). Within academia, the concept of international cooperation appears to be as old as universities themselves (King, 2020). However, meaningful North-South collaboration only really took off following recognition of the role of higher education in the 1990s.

International cooperation assumes a variety of forms and delivery mechanisms that include networks (defined as a relatively loose form of cooperation characterised by horizontal exchange of information, lacking a hierarchy and long-term commitment); cooperation (a form of organised interaction towards a common end for mutual benefit); and partnerships (highly structured forms of cooperation, with long-term concrete activities, a form of contract, and autonomous participating partners) (Baud and Post, 2001). Collaboration schemes use different mechanisms to channel resources to scientific and technological activities, including bilateral and multilateral mechanisms, non-governmental organisations (NGOs) and international scientific societies (Gaillard, 1994). According to Halvorsen and Nossum (2016), Northern universities and researchers depend heavily on bilateral, multilateral and international donor organisations, foundations and governments to fund North-South collaborations. Within these broad frameworks, the conceptualisation of academic collaboration can take different modalities including the purposes for which it is designed, the major participants involved and the location (North-South), etc. (Obamwa and Mewa, 2009; Bradley, 2007).

Academic collaboration has now become a ubiquitous feature of institutional operations organised in a wide variety of structural forms and for different purposes among individual researchers, academic institutions, international development agencies, and governments (Obamwa and Mewa, 2009). The literature notes that its objectives and benefits include enhancing and developing institutional status and competitiveness; building teaching, research and outreach capacity; improving overall systems and instructional practice; organisational and/or institutional development, professional development and learning; enhanced academic exposure; and research collaboration and networking (Boeren, 2012; Hanada, 2021). Specific partnerships may also include staff development schemes, curriculum development, improved teaching and research facilities, joint research activities, staff and student exchange and professional advice which tend to overlap or be combined (Boeren, 2012).

### The notion of relevance

Academic collaboration's success is mediated by a variety of factors that include relevance which is often raised as a key element, especially in contexts where the collaborating parties seek to maximise their benefits. Relevance is defined as, "The extent to which the objectives of a development intervention are consistent with beneficiaries' requirements, country needs, global priorities and partners' and donors' policies" (OECD, 2002, p. 32). According to Klakegg (2015, p. 13), it "represents a connection between activities in the project, their results and outcomes and the purpose. If the activities produce results that is not what the users wants or needs, or if results do not comply with the requirements set up by the owner or financing party - then your project does not produce the right solution. The result will not be used as intended, and thus the intended value will never be generated."

The notion of relevance emphasises the need to understand one's own context which is a critical component of any cooperative scheme. Kim, Sohn and Lee (2020) note that it covers the relevance of *objectives*, *project design*, and *targeting*.

### The relevance of objectives

Although formulating objectives is undoubtedly a difficult task, it remains an essential requirement in all academic collaborative schemes. According to Klakegg (2010, p. 420), relevance is directly related to the objectives of a collaborative project, and is often about assessing the degree to which the objectives are in keeping with valid priorities and the users' needs or how the issue of usefulness is judged from the owner's or financing party's viewpoint. As noted by UNESCO (1975, p. 793), joint collaboration at various levels is only effective if there is legitimate interest in the matter by all concerned, if it results in work of higher quality and relevance, and if disparities in academic resources and capacity between participants from developed and developing countries and within developing countries diminish as a result of collaboration.

A lack of relevance in a given collaborative project or partnership scheme may be due to the fact that users' needs are *unknown*, *misunderstood* or *ignored* (Klakegg, 2010). The project's objectives may not be stated clearly or expressed in a very unclear manner. Users' needs are sometimes ignored by planners and decision makers due to political

factors or participants' personal inclinations, especially if planners and decision makers consider themselves better able to assess needs and thus override users' stated preferences; consider political goals and priorities more important than users' needs; or regard their own goals and priorities as more important (Klakegg, 2010).

It is argued that the needs and priorities of the South should be the basis for partnerships in North-South cooperation schemes (Eshuchi, 2009). The fundamental danger underlying a supply-oriented identification of needs is that the Northern institution influences the agendas and major areas of interest of institutions in the South (Audenhoven, 2015). Carbonnier and Kontinen (2015, p. 154) found that one of the many practices identified as negative by Southern partners is 'unilateral dictation' and 'pre-determination' of the research agenda by Northern partners in order to fit 'Northern perceived quality' with little input from Southern partners.

It is important to bear in mind that partner institutions in the North and South may have different and multiple motivations and interests in entering a collaborative agreement. While those in the North could be motivated by the possibility of undertaking joint research, data collection, the internationalisation of education, financial and personal considerations and international solidarity with developing countries, institutions in the South may have different motives such as agreements on institutional development, joint research, support for courses, staff training, financial or infrastructural support and academic networks (Audenhoven, 2015). Although strong Southern research organisations are best placed to maximise the benefits of collaboration, many organisations entering into partnerships lack a clear sense of their priorities and institutional capacities that are critical to successful negotiations (Bradley, 2008). This is perhaps why the literature on North-South research cooperation often laments that collaborative agendas continue to be determined by the interests of Northern donors and scholars, and calls for more equitable Southern engagement in agenda-setting (Bradley, 2008). Hence, objectives and goals should be identified based on a common understanding of the motives and interests on both sides of the partnership, and relevant stakeholders' active participation and involvement (Bradley, 2008; Klakegg, 2010).

Audenhoven (2015) identifies two major models to match the needs of partner institutions in the North and South, namely, 'consensus' and

'tendering'. In the consensus model, cooperation is initiated by both or one of the partner institutions. Both or one of the partners submit a joint proposal for cooperation which is evaluated by an independent commission, taking into account the needs and priorities of the Southern partner. While the main advantage of this kind of matching is that the partners are acquainted and ready for cooperation, its drawback is that, because of its asymmetrical nature, it is easy for the Northern partner to adopt a more hands-on approach (Audehoven, 2015). In the tendering model, the initiative lies with the Southern partners who draw up initial project plans that are tendered to institutions in the North that respond to the proposals. The role of the donor or intermediate organisation is confined to that of a broker. The main advantage of this procedure is that the initiative, identification of needs and to some extent the drafting of projects originate solely from the Southern partner which is more appropriate and can help to avoid excessive Northern influence, misplaced priorities and *a priori* asymmetrical partnerships (Audehoven, 2015).

Many partnerships are premised on the assumption that all those involved are well-intended, well-informed and culturally sensitive, and that these qualities are sufficient for equitable agenda setting (Bradley, 2008). While these qualities are certainly important during the initial phase of an academic collaboration, they cannot substitute for the advantages that strong Southern organisations can bring during the negotiation process. This is because such organisations are characterised by realistic awareness of their own strengths and weaknesses; sound administrative systems; relatively stable finances; and most importantly, a clear institutional mandate and agenda (Bradley, 2008). As noted by Bradley (2008, p. 682), given the abundant obstacles, the "strength of the Southern institution in a North-South partnership stands out as the primary factor affecting successful negotiations that are both mutually beneficial and rooted in Southern priorities".

### **The relevance of project design**

As noted earlier, successful partnerships require that collaboration be designed based on needs and joint agenda setting and initiation (Halvorsen and Nossun, 2016). However, partnerships can fail due to poor planning and decision making. A systematic planning and decision-making process provides a fundamental logical framework for the project

and clearly formulates the objectives and goals (Klakegg, 2010; Csiszárík-Kocsir, 2018). Eshuchi (2009) contends that, “The partners should have a clear map of which responsibilities rest with which partner thus ensuring clear communication and coordination.” Ideally, the actors from the North and South should share decision-making power over planning and implementation of joint programmes, and should engage in mutual governance, with each partner having some substantive influence on the policies and practices of the other at the implementation level. A further principle is sustainable development, which essentially involves the Southern partners being groomed to take over the project and run their own in the future (Eshuchi, 2009). Eshuchi (2009) further argues that, in pursuit of relevance, programmes should be situated closer to the South in terms of delivery and cooperation, focusing on the needs of Southern partners and assigning them a larger role in the collaboration since this can not only lend it relevance but also increase the chances of success. This is in line with the general assumption that “development is essentially an internally-driven process that the donors can merely accelerate or contribute to by enabling a conducive environment for the process to succeed” (Eshuchi, 2009, p. 45).

### The relevance of targeting societal needs

The overall goals of academic cooperation schemes are often assumed to be academic ones. Beyond such objectives, it is becoming increasingly common to assess their relevance in terms of meeting societal needs and promoting developmental goals (i.e., what they bring to the economy, society, culture, public administration, health, the environment and overall quality of life), which need to be considered from the earliest phase until the end of a cooperative agreement. Re-orientation of collaboration schemes is thus required in order to make them more relevant to the basic needs of Southern partners. UNESCO asserts that:

It is time to seek alternative development strategies more relevant to Third World [sic] needs: (a) which extend beyond material progress to integrate the cultural and social values of society; (b) which benefit the bulk of the population, and not only a privileged minority through appropriate socio-economic structural changes; (c) which reflect a creative interaction between indigenous thinking and external experience and which are based on appropriate technology and resources indigenous (1975, p. 792).

Similarly, Eshuchi (2009, p. 45) notes, “Partnerships in development aid are meant to ensure the relevance of the projects. Projects would only contribute to development if they address the problems of the South with appropriate tools and measure[s].” Only through such considerations can collaborations respond to community needs and equip different actors with the knowledge necessary to tackle pressing development issues (Bradley, 2008).

### Academic collaboration schemes and the issue of relevance

Academic collaboration can incorporate different schemes including collaboration between scholars, disciplines, institutions, sectors, and countries (Shin et al., 2013). As noted earlier, it can also be effected in various modalities such as staff exchange and development, collaborative research, etc. The following sections examine how the notion of relevance is addressed in research projects and scholarships/fellowships which are two of the most common forms of academic collaboration.

### Research projects

Knowledge generated through research can achieve relevance in three major ways: *Output*: The increment in knowledge generated on an issue and its availability in the form of concrete products; *Outcome*: The importance assigned to knowledge, and its uptake in a specific societal context; *Impact*: Changes in real-world situations through action that results from societal uptake of the new knowledge (KFPE, 2011). This suggests the need to assess the quality of research not only by the rigours of academic disciplines, but also by its contribution and impact within society (Barrett et al., 2011).

For too long, research projects between the North and South have been characterised by various forms of dominance and inequalities. Addressing this gap calls for a more equitable form of partnerships. According to UNESCO (1975, p. 793), strengthening research and training capability in developing countries involves four elements: (a) reorientation towards greater relevance in their activities; (b) improvement in the professional quality of their work, particularly in the weaker institutions which often lack sufficient resources; (c) expansion in the number of capable training and research institutions and staff; (d) building mechanisms for collaboration. Relevance continues to be important in Northern partners’

continued efforts to modify their research partnership schemes with the South. As argued by Eshuchi (2009, pp. 39-40),

For this new approach to be effective, it should focus on three principal objectives. First, donor interventions should be relevant to the development needs of the African countries. This should entail a focus on enabling African higher education to adapt to and utilize the knowledge economy towards becoming engines of growth and development. They should reflect the needs of the African continent, specifically in terms of promoting appropriate science and technology and also research on development issues. Secondly, the interventions should shift from a development aid perspective towards collaboration in knowledge production. And thirdly, the interventions should strive to strengthen research capacity and infrastructure through collaboration and targeted funding (Domatob, 1998, p. 58; Norad, 2005, p. 139).

Practical considerations in responding to the question of relevance while establishing research priorities include clarity with regard to objectives, ideas and needs with the equal participation of stakeholders from the South. A good example of the failure to establish priorities between the North and South is what is known as the '10/90 gap' in health research where less than 10% of global spending is devoted to 90% of the world's health problems that are pervasive in the developing world (Global Forum for Health Research, 2020).

Decisions and the development of research themes should thus involve the active participation of all partners, including those who will use the results (KFPE, 1998). Schemes for research funding should aim to put Southern partners in the driving seat to enable them to select a relevant Northern partner (Carbonnier and Kontinew, 2015, p. 160). Collaboration of this nature is not only considered as a vehicle to focus research on the priority needs of the South, but it can also address the power differentials determined by history and economic inequalities, and strengthen Southern partners' institutional and national research capacity, reducing their dependence on Northern research organisations and expertise (Barrett et al., 2011; Jentsch, 2004).

However, this is always a challenging task:

It must be remembered that the process in which the partners 'find' each other is usually very time-consuming. This is particularly

true for the members of the teams who are directly involved in the research activities. Nevertheless, the effort is rewarding in many different ways. In order to involve wider circles – including the local population – in both the preparations and the actual research work, special meetings need to be organized, and if necessary, information must be prepared in a form in which it can be understood by the general public (KFPE, 1998, p. 8).

Despite the many challenges, there are increasing signs that Northern partners are addressing the issue of relevance through policy postures and practical engagements. The Netherlands Development Assistance Research Council (RAWOO), which was disbanded in 2007, determined research agendas by Southern partners based on the principles of cooperation and equality and strongly supported demand driven research that considered locally (Southern) defined research priorities and needs (Ishengoma, 2016). Similarly, the Swedish International Development Cooperation Agency (SIDA) asserts that relevance to society – i.e., science-based policy making, improved products and services and ultimately poverty reduction and sustainability, is a key aspect of its research funding. The Swiss Commission for Research Partnerships with Developing Countries (KFPE) (1998) contends that like any cooperative enterprise, research partnerships must always be oriented towards particular goals and a specific setting, including their relevance to development and the need for results that are visible to and tangible for the local community.

Various schemes or frameworks that incorporate basic considerations like the issue of relevance have also been developed to guide the establishment and monitoring of different forms of research partnerships. The ESSENCE research framework developed by funding agencies to improve coordination and harmonisation of investment in research capacity outlines seven principles that guide the "coordination and harmonization of research capacity investment": Network, collaborate, communicate and share experiences; understand the local context and evaluate existing research capacity; ensure local ownership and active support; build in monitoring, evaluation and learning from the start; establish robust research governance and support structures and promote effective leadership; embed strong support, supervision and mentorship structures; and think long-term, be flexible and plan for continuity (Fekadu et al., 2021).

The KFPE's guidelines for research partnerships with developing countries focus on planning, implementation and application of research. The principles include: 1. Decide on the objectives together 2. Build mutual trust 3. Share information; develop networks 4. Share responsibility 5. Create transparency 6. Monitor and evaluate the collaboration 7. Disseminate the results 8. Apply the results 9. Share profits equitably 10. Increase research capacity, and 11. Build on the achievements (Fekadu et al., 2021). The related Collaborative Advantage Framework was developed to maximise the impact of SDG partnerships. It sets out ten strategies to create additional 'value' and maximise impact and risk reduction. This approach embraces 'collaboration maturity models' that describe the progressive steps that promote productive relationships between partners for the purposes of pulling strengths together and gaining competitive advantage. The values-driven and progressive academic partnership maturity model it proposes for global partnerships is anchored on equity, mutual benefit, growth, and sustainability (Fekadu et al., 2021).

### Scholarships/fellowships

One of the major academic collaboration schemes where the issue of relevance is often raised is the provision of scholarships/fellowships to Southern countries. Capacity building through scholarships/fellowships is given priority in development oriented partnerships as it is assumed that it will enhance self-sufficiency. Scholarship programmes have long been a major part of global efforts to broaden access to higher education and research (again, indicating a belief in capacity development at the individual level).

However, such initiatives confront numerous challenges and dilemmas, including the brain-drain and the relevance, usefulness and cost-effectiveness of non-localised education and qualifications (Halvorsen and Nassum, 2016). As noted by Barrett et al. (2011), focusing capacity development on individuals does not necessarily strengthen any specific institution due to the mobility gained by recipients. Indeed, scholarships to study overseas remove key talented people from institutions in low-income countries for long periods of time, and student awards redirect funds supposedly 'donated' to low-income countries to the coffers of universities in the donor country.

The impact of scholarships is often assumed to increase if individual opportunities are integrated or closely linked to broader institutional or

developmental goals (Boeren, 2012). It is argued that training should not only be relevant to the applicant, but its impact should extend beyond his/her individual interests. Accordingly, relevance should be one of the factors employed to assess the success of fellowship programmes and address the specific capacity needs of the developing world.

For instance, the Norwegian Agency for Development Cooperation (Norad) Fellowship Programme (NFP) uses *relevance* (the extent to which it was consistent with development cooperation objectives), *effectiveness* (the extent to which major objectives were achieved at country and programme level), *efficiency* (the extent to which administrative and financial arrangements contributed to achieving programme objectives), *sustainability* (continuation of programmes as normal anchored courses at universities) and the *impact* (change agent impact especially as regards development and Norwegian objectives in partner countries) as key criteria to assess the programme (Eshuchi, 2009, p. 61).

Norad's Programme for Master Studies (NOMA), which focused on capacity building for master's programmes in Global South countries, was implemented from 2006 to 2014 and its indicators of success were identified as the number of master's programmes established at institutions in the Global South, including those of direct relevance to the work force; the number of candidates educated; and the number of candidates educated through NOMA and employed by institutions in the South (Carbonnier and Kontinen, 2015).

However, collaboration schemes may not always adopt these principles. For such schemes to work effectively, the opportunities created should be linked to broader institutional or organisational development goals. At one level, the relevance of courses and the training approach need to correspond to the training needs in developing countries. The relevance of fellowship programmes to the development of the candidate's country of origin could be assessed through different instruments including a) nomination and selection criteria and processes, b) assessment of curricula, c) location and duration of training (Eshuchi, 2009).

Despite being successful, the NFP is reported to be no longer relevant due to a multitude of reasons that include the lack of objective assessment of the development needs of Southern partners, the fact that the programme became supply-driven with no transparent link to the demands of developing countries, and its inability to achieve critical

mass, which would be essential in achieving the change agent effect that was originally hoped for (Eshuchi, 2009). The need to address these deficiencies resulted in the introduction of a revised NOMA.

The Norwegian Partnership Programme for Global Academic Cooperation (NORPART) was launched by the Norwegian government in 2016. Instead of one-way mobility where students from the Global South study at Norwegian universities, students at both universities spend time at the other institution, and degrees are granted by the home university, thus preventing brain drain from the Global South (Carbonnier and Kontinen, 2015).

### **Towards addressing relevance concerns and challenges**

The challenges confronting sustainable international university partnerships include legal, financial, academic, institutional, and cultural issues as well as concerns with regard to evaluation (Tekleselassie and Ford, 2019). One of the major challenges in addressing relevance is the unequal relationship between the North and South which has also been identified as the most common obstacle for many collaborative schemes.

The persistent global inequities and vast asymmetries in various partnership domains have been identified as 'hegemonic', 'paternalistic', 'asymmetrical', and 'imbalanced' (Sabzalieva et al., 2019). One of the challenges of North-South collaboration is the North's attempt to impose its political, socio-cultural and economic hegemony. As noted by Obamba and Mwema (2009), while the economic dimension of the asymmetry entails staggering material and financial inequalities, the epistemological dimension is concerned with historical and political pre-eminence associated with Western knowledge and knowledge systems, with non-Western knowledge systematically relegated to a peripheral epistemic position.

However, the traditional notion of partnership is shifting from one of external imposition and prescription to 'mutuality' where the interests of collaborative parties are equally respected. As noted by Rosseel et al. (2009), there are signs that Northern partners are willing to transform dubious unequal North-South partnerships from the donor-recipient dynamic into partnerships with shared ownership and decision-making. Given the demand for new forms of cooperation, there seems to be growing consensus on the basic principles of the mode of cooperation,

which includes long-term partnerships, orientation in accordance with the institutional needs and priorities of the partner university in the South, ownership of the project by South partners, sustainability, and donor coordination (Audenhoven, 2015). Audenhoven (2015) notes that the recent restructuring of Canadian, Dutch, Norwegian and Swedish policies and organisations (e.g., SAREC, SIDA, NORAD and the IDRC) with regard to support for higher education and research is the result of a quest for more appropriate models of cooperation. These new forms of partnership have begun to be described in normative or aspirational language using terms such as 'shared interest', 'mutual vision', 'true partnership', etc. Boeren (2013, p. 1) notes that:

The ownership of higher education cooperation programmes and projects is moving from Northern institutions to those in the South. Increasingly, demands in the South determine how the available donor funds are utilised, and Southern partners are encouraged to take full ownership and responsibility for the funded programmes and projects of their choice. Across the board, the influence of Northern partners on project identification as well as programme management is decreasing. In some programmes, the interests of the Southern partners already prevail, reducing the Northern partners to service providers.

While this is encouraging, implementation of such principles is often marred by a variety of challenges (Downes, 2013). Many scholars point to the complex reality that is often influenced by factors that extend from language barriers and complex management structures to inequitable access to financial resources, libraries, conferences, training, and publishing opportunities, mismatched expectations, a lack of face-to-face interaction, and different levels of methodological sophistication (Bradley, 2008). The rhetoric and discourses of academic partnership conceal the underlying power dynamics and resource inequalities among partners, creating the misleading impression that partnerships are necessarily neutral and mutually beneficial (Obamba and Mwema, 2009). In particular, the imbalance between Northern and Southern partners has been reflected in specific areas such as taking the initiative, interests, agenda setting, power (funding, methodological competence, operational responsibility, interaction), technical support and benefits (Halvorsen



and Nossun, 2016). Bradley identifies the spheres of direct and indirect influence available to donors:

Albeit deeply troubling, overt donor interference in shaping or restricting the dissemination of research results appears to be relatively rare. Instead, donors exert considerable indirect influence over agenda-setting processes by identifying their programme priorities and determining the structure of the international research funding system. Donors influence agenda-setting processes by requiring the studies that they fund to be explicitly 'policy-relevant'; by concertedly supporting multi-disciplinary, multi stakeholder projects; and by constantly revising their programmatic priorities, which can impede researchers' efforts to embark on long-term investigations (2008, p. 675).

Hence, donors and Northern partners are advised to be aware of these asymmetric power relations and their implications for the success of partnerships in order to reduce structural imbalances through considered inculcation of partnership values in their programmes (Eschuchi, 2009).

### Conclusion

This article raises an array of issues that need to be considered in addressing the notion of relevance in academic collaboration schemes. It showed that the design and implementation of such schemes need to address the issue of relevance which refers to the extent to which the objectives of collaboration are consistent with beneficiaries' requirements, country needs, global priorities and partners' and donors' policies (OECD, 2002). It is becoming increasingly clear that scientific advances are not the only yardstick to measure the success of North-South academic collaborations; the choice of priorities, sustainability of interventions and investment in local capacity are equally important (Edejer, 1999, p. 438). This article argued that equitable, collaborative agenda setting, collaborative design and decision-making procedures, and consideration of developmental goals as the end product of a collaboration scheme can be used to address issues of relevance. Failure to address relevance concerns limits academics or institutions, who are lured away from addressing local or national priority areas. This can result in the relevance of the cooperation itself being questioned, let alone the outcome (Halvorsen and Nossun, 2016).

Only through mutually desired and designed schemes can academic collaboration succeed in addressing the immediate objectives and ultimate goals of relevance.

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