Academic cooperation with AALA partners
first results of an explorative survey

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Survey on international collaboration – Why, what, who

- Based on ongoing reflection at IOB on GN-GS collaboration,
  extended to the Global Engagement Working Group

- Exploration of AALA / GS partners' perceptions on collaboration with Uantwerp through an (anonymous) survey.

- Contacted promotors (RIVA + Internationalisation department dataset),
  then sent out to their contacts

- Sent out to 100 contacts; 30 full responses

- Descriptive results, as basis for discussion (work in progress!)

Survey on international collaboration? What, why, who

- Blocks of questions

    1. Introduction
    2. Descriptive info on institution, respondent and collaboration
    3. The origin, nature and future of the relationship
    4. Agenda-setting and funding
    5. Collaboration and division of tasks
    6. Costs and benefits for both institutions
    7. Final comments

Info on responding institutions and their collaboration

Characteristics of respondents

- Mostly public universities (77%), followed by private universities (13%).
- Predominantly located in Africa (70%), followed by Latin America (30%). No responses from Asian partners.

Low income country	15	52%
Lower middle-income country	10	34%
Upper middle-income country	4	14%

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Info on responding institutions and their collaboration

How they respond to the questionnaire

From 1 project	17	57%
Historical set of collaborations	13	43%

How they consider the partnership

Project-based (temporary/one-off)	20	67%
A structural partnership	10	33%

- Most collaborations hinge on a single project rather than a structural partnership
- Some partnerships date back to the '90s and '00s; 7 collaborations > 10 years

- Even long-standing collaborations can be perceived as project-based.

- *What is a structural partnership? How to maintain it in between projects?*

Info on responding institutions and their collaboration

- Disciplines

	Count	Percentage
Medicine and health sciences	9	30%
Social sciences: communication sciences, sociology, development studies,…	7	23%
Other *(mostly referring to applied ecology - interdisciplinarity)*	5	17%
Exact sciences: physics, mathematics, chemistry, biology, computer sciences,…	3	10%
Applied engineering	2	7%
Arts	2	7%
Law	2	7%
Pharmaceutical, biomedical and veterinary sciences	2	7%
Business and economics	1	3%

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Info on responding institutions and their collaboration

- Purpose of the collaboration (multiple answers possible)

Fundamental scientific research	16	53%
Applied research	13	43%
Academic education	12	40%
Student mobility	7	23%
Professional training	6	20%
Staff mobility	4	13%
Other	2	7%
Societal outreach	2	7%

- Collaborations are multidimensional, but mostly research-driven
- Many combine research with training and mobility
- Societal outreach hardly appears → only mentioned in 2 cases (even with multiple options possible).

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Type of funding

What kind of funding supports / has supported the collaboration over the years?

Scientific / research funding	87%	26
Student / staff mobility-related funding	47%	14
Education-oriented funding	40%	12
Development-oriented funding	7%	2
Climate-related funding	7%	2

Belgian funder	43%	13
International funder	23%	7
International funder and Belgian funder	13%	4
A national funder and Belgian funder	10%	3
A national funder	43%	3

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Partners involved

Only UAntwerp and your institution	10
Other international partners	9
Other national partners	6
Other Belgian partners	5

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Who took the initiative?

- *Who initiated the contact?*

  - Partner-initiated: 17
  - UAntwerp-initiated: 11

- **How was it established?**

Former UAntwerp mobility as connector: 13/30 indicate the relationship started through prior training/mobility at UAntwerp.

"Southern researchers must first find a Northern collaborator to even apply for funding."

Future of collaboration

- Is there a strategy to continue the collaboration?

Yes	53%
Unclear	30%
No	17%

- Expectations of continuation, including optimism about chances of success (72% expect these to be high)

"Strengthening institutional links between our universities could enhance sustainability and allow for greater alignment with national health priorities. "
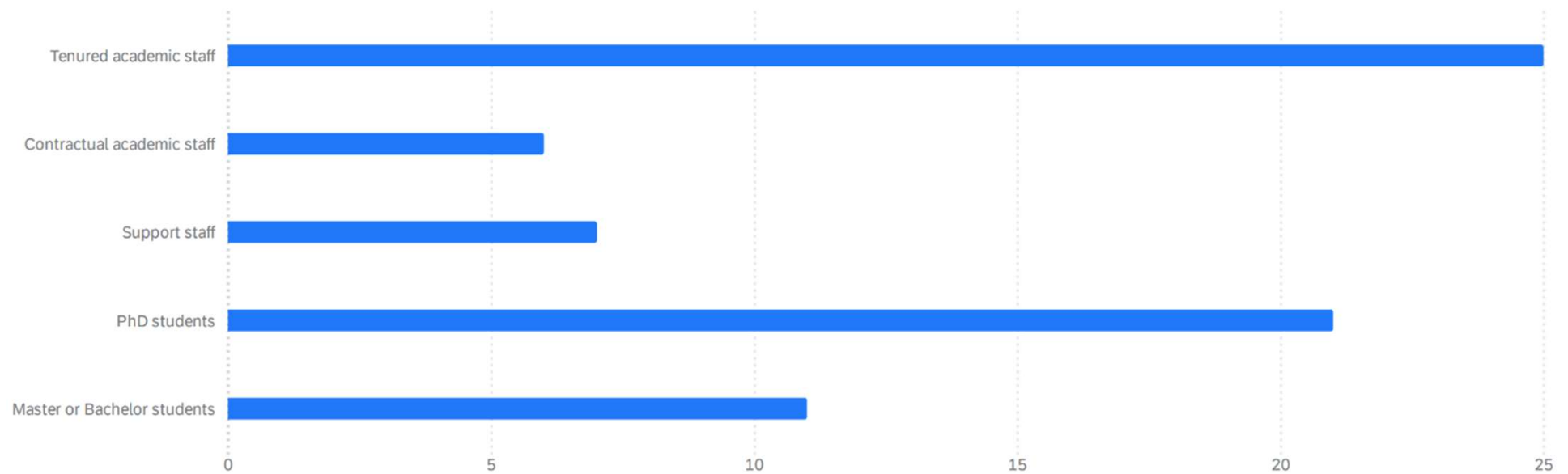
But also

"We have been looking for other project opportunities, but our North partners seem to be very busy with other project currently that they are not willing to take on new engagements."

Future of collaboration

Is external funding accessible for you/your institution?	For education and staff exchange	For scientific research	For societal impact funding (e.g. for development, climate, entrepreneurship...)
Yes	28%	38%	38%
Limited	55%	48%	41%
No	17%	14%	21%

Staff involved

2.6 What type of staff have been involved? (several answers possible) `30` ⓘ

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Responsibility & accountability

- *If external funding is involved for this project/collaboration with UAntwerp, who are the formal partners and legally responsible for the implementation?*

Both your institution and UAntwerp, with UAntwerp as lead agency	42%	11
Jointly with other international partners, and UAntwerp as lead agency	19%	5
Both your institution and UAntwerp, with your institution as lead agency	8%	2
Jointly with other international partners and your institution as lead agency	8%	2
Jointly with other international partners, with another international partner as lead agency	8%	2
Only your institution	8%	2
Don't know	8%	2

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Responsibility & accountability

- *In your perception, who is accountable for the funding?*

Joint accountability	16
UAntwerp	7
Your institution / yourself	6
Other partner	1

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Agenda-setting

Who formulated the ideas for the current (latest) project?

Joint formulation	20	66,67%
Mainly UAntwerp promotor	9	30,00%
Other, please specify	1	3,33%

Does the collaboration with UAntwerp address scientific or societal issues that are a priority to your institution?

Yes	26	87%
To a certain extent	4	13%
No	0	0%

If you had the opportunity, would you rather address other priority concerns/topics?

Yes	15	50%
To a certain extent	6	20%
No	9	30%

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Agenda-setting

What other priorities?

Some specific to project and context (e.g. which other disease or ecosystem to focus on);

others more general (e.g. climate change adaptation and mitigation, and funding for research infrastructure).

Also suggestions on training/capacity-building on AI and training for research in high-risk and authoritarian context.

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Agenda-setting

Why not taken into account?

Most frequent reason: "Not a priority for funding agencies" (11/30)

Additional reasons: limited budget (which forces choices); funders' thematic windows (other funding lines are better), lack of capacity to influence other parties in proposal formulation.

→ Partner priorities diverge from what *funders* prioritise, not necessarily from what *UAntwerp* partner prioritises?

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Methodology

Do you agree with the chosen methodological approach of the collaboration/project

Yes	25
Partially	5
No	0

If possible, would you give attention to alternative methodological approaches?

Yes	12
Maybe	13
No	5

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Methodology

What other methodologies?

[different interpretation on whether it's the methodology of the project, or of the project application]

- Longitudinal studies / follow-up research;
- Focus more on capacity building for staff and the institution (compared to e.g. mainly lab-based work);
- Approaches to assess the impact of the research;
- Participatory Action Research (but too time-consuming and expensive?)
- "Mixed methods"

Methodology

- "Funders and universities should involve partner institutions in setting research priorities from the beginning. Research topics should be based on local […] problems and real community needs."

- "Make sure institutions from Africa, Asia, and Latin America have a fair say in what research is done and how money is used"

- "Organize joint planning meetings between funders, researchers, and local partners before writing research agendas"

- "Joint fund application and management"

- "Joint collaborations with other universities and international agencies"

➔ **Setting research priorities from the start and together with partners and/or communities (possibly with co-creation); focus also on capacity building.**

Difference between quantitative and qualitative findings of the survey…

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Partnership quality

	Strongly positive	Positive	Neutral	Negative
Professional exchanges	17	12	0	1
Administrative procedures	11	15	2	1
Management /leadership	12	16	2	0
Personal relationships	18	10	1	1

(note: where could they go with complaints about the partnership?)

Extra comments on agenda-setting

*"[The collaborators/mentors of the University of Antwerp] have been able to understand and appreciate our country's situation and are willing to provide support. Interestingly, they have not only relied in an online meetings but they **have in different occasions visited our University, encouraged us and advised us on matters that we have asked guidance**."*

*"**Guidance on additional funding** opportunities is always helpful"*

*"**Joint analysis on needs** for the execution of a project..."*

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Extra comments on agenda-setting

"There should be more open and fair ways of setting research priorities and sharing funding. ***Often, Southern researchers must first find a collaborator in a Northern university to even apply for funding.*** *This limits opportunities, especially for those without connections.* ***Many good ideas are lost if they don't match the interests of Northern partners.*** *All partners should be involved early, with clear communication on budgets and shared decision-making.* ***Strong partnerships need trust, not just technical collaboration."***

"Since not much is done on ***strengthening the internal system of the local universities*** *mismatch of system creates delay in financial transaction and reporting."*

"one topic that need to be taken into consideration always is the ***imbalance of power relations between universities from the north and south global limiting horizontality****. A second topic is related to* ***a more just funds distribution*** *among partners."*

Division of tasks

"How do you assess the nature and degree of active involvement of yourself/your institution in the academic collaboration? (if applicable)".

Slider from 0 to 100,
- 0 =UAntwerp (or other partner(s) in the consortium) taking the full lead
- 100 = the partner institution taking the lead.

	Average	N
Formulation of the purpose of the initiative (e.g. research question…)	55,79	29
Definition of educational/training contents	57,37	19
Translation of education/training contents into policies, intervention or community strategies	68,75	20
Choice and framing of the theoretical approach	52,31	26
Choice of the methodological approach	54,85	26
Design and/or implementation of tools	59,68	25
Choice of criteria and standards of academic quality	58,2	20
Primary data-collection(e.g. surveys, clinical tests, interviews, …)	74,25	24
Primary data-collection in less safe, risky or enduring areas	75,06	18
Local logistical and practical support to the researchers	66,67	24
Initial descriptive analysis of the data (summary reports, descriptive statistics, …)	65,25	24
In-depth processing and analysis of the data in view of internal research reporting	60,48	23
In-depth processing and analysis of the data in view of local academic publication	55,27	22
In-depth processing and analysis of the data in view of international peer-reviewed academic publication	55,67	24
In-depth processing and analysis of the data in view of policy or development-oriented publication	63,86	21
Feedback and participatory corroboration and analysis of data with respondents/ target groups	67,1	20
Translation of research results into policies, intervention or community strategies	69,77	22
Choice and definition of the societal outreach initiatives (target group, objectives, methodological approach, partners, …)	70,74	23

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Standards of academic quality

Are the standards of (academic) quality followed in the collaboration with UAntwerp adequate or biased?

Adequate	27	96%
Biased	1	4%
Inadequate	0	0%

A recognition of how 'international' these standards are?

Accepted as universal and not much reflection about it?

Financial costs

The main financial costs are for: Salaries for researchers; equipment and infrastructure; and administrative costs.

Are those financial costs adequately covered by the project funding and/or the UAntwerp or other international academic partners (if relevant)?

Yes	17
To some degree	8
No	3

Comments mostly refer to **overhead, admin support**.

Also reference to the context in which professors don't get paid by their institution to do research.

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Financial costs

Who decides about the use of the budget throughout the project? In other words, according to your perception, who 'owns' the grant?

(same 'slider' as before)

Average is **40.15.**

Only 7 out of 30 indicated that they had more to say about the use of the budget than UAntwerp

Main benefits

Do you consider that the collaboration with UAntwerp focusses on the right priorities in terms of the direct benefits to you/your institution

Yes	23	82%
To some degree	5	18%
No	0	0 %

Findings from quotes on 'to some degree':
- More comparative research and teaching – i.e. also South partners studying Europe and teaching there
- Support local PhD programmes rather than (only) having PhDs go to UAntwerp
- Depending on the type of funding, there is more say and resources for the partners.

Main benefits

How do you evaluate the net benefits of the collaboration for your institution compared to that of UAntwerp?

Higher	13
Similar	11
Lower	3

How do you evaluate the cost-benefit relation for your institution?

Strongly positive	13
Positive	12
Break-even	2
Negative	0
Strongly negative	0

Summary?

- **Both project-based and structural partnerships – with attempts at sustainability**
- **Partners are highly involved in data collection and local engagement (>70).**
- **But have relatively less influence/leadership over theoretical and methodological choices?**
- **Agreement with priorities, but would also put forward other priorities.**

    Joint agenda-setting from the start

    (And what about communities' priorities?)

    How can this be supported?

    And what about more societal outreach finality/funding?

- **Dependence on (GN) funding**
- **No real questioning of the academic quality standards/priorities**
- **Budget "ownership" average = 40 → UAntwerp has more control.**
- **Difficulties to cover overhead and –sometimes- researchers' salaries**

Reflections / Discussion

- Overall: both appreciation and room for improvement. Does it resonate?

- What is the dependence – reciprocity among partners?

- How can UAntwerp/funders support equitable agenda-setting with partners / communities?

- Complexity / context-specificity

    - What is the broader context, and what can we change?

- Towards 'transformative collaborations'? (Aboderin et al. 2023)

    - Agenda-setting & (epistemic) power (*at level of partner, or communities?*)

    - 'Expertise'

    - The research value chain and extractivism

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