North–South academic partnerships as inherent 'frictions': what does this mean for IOB?

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Abstract: International partnerships are considered to be a strong and beneficial part of IOB's DNA, but are taking place in a context of global inequalities – affecting these partnerships in a number of ways. This paper does two things. First, relying on the academic literature, the paper zooms out, and identifies a series of frictions influencing North-South academic partnerships in general - beyond the specifics of IOB. Concretely, it identifies the following four frictions: (i) asymmetries between North-South partnerships; (ii) the tension between the academic and developmental nature of these partnerships; (iii) the tension between international standards and local needs; and (iv) the way in which different political economies of research and teaching affect these partnerships. Second, the paper reflects how these above frictions play out in the IOB relations with its partner institutes. It for example highlights the various incentives of different actors, and how these can create additional frictions between and within different partners. It also thinks about ways to reduce these frictions and inequalities.

1. Introduction

What way forward for the Institute of Development Policy's (IOB) international partnerships, in particular with academic institutes in the 'South'? These partnerships are considered to be a strong and beneficial part of IOB's DNA, and have historically been part of it. This paper results from an attempt at thinking about future direction(s) for these partnerships. Yet, as quickly found out when reading, and writing, on this; these questions cannot be considered in isolation, but build on broader reflections on academic partnerships between the Global North and Global South[2].

The difference between the ideals and intentions of North-South academic partnerships and the realities of the current circumstances has been widely shown (Melber 2019). In particular the asymmetry of collaboration and dominance of Northern partners is important here (Gaillard 1994), leading to a process which has been referred to as 'clear winners and losers' in these partnerships (Grieve and Mitchell 2020: 525). As a result, there has been a longstanding call and need for collaborative relationships which benefit both sides (Gaillard 1994). There is a consensus that collaboration should be "based on a strong mutual interest and if both parties have something to gain from it." (Guillard 1994: 57) – or, as Nyamnjoh and Nantang (2002: 21) called it in their introduction to a special issue on 'African universities in crisis', the "forging of a mutuality" in collaborative research with African universities.

Yet, what does this mean? How to avoid reproducing historical inequalities, and what does this mean for IOB's international collaborations in general? This paper does not aim to provide clear-cut answers, but aims to provide an overview of the relevant frictions and questions.

This paper consists of two general parts: first, it describes a number of 'frictions', which are important to take into consideration in North-South partnerships; and secondly, it reflects on what this can mean

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[2] I use these terms similar to DSA (2019: 3), which state that "North and South are used as shorthand. Both are of course internally diverse, and their polarity is contested".

for IOB and its partnerships. In doing so, this paper primarily aims to highlight the main debates, and to suggest potential courses of action.

Both of these are informed by the methodology used: on the one hand a review of the literature; and on the other hand interviews with the engaged actors. This methodology has its limitations: there's a wide literature on these debates, and this paper aims to present a relevant snapshot of the relevant debates – not a complete (re)presentation of this literature. Also the interviews have their merits, and limitations: interviews were conducted with 8 IOB staff involved, and 6 staff from partner institutes in the Global South. The main function of this input was therefore to introduce the main debates; but this certainly deserves further input.

In unpacking these issues and questions, I rely on Tsing's (2005: 5) notion of 'friction', the "awkward, unequal, unstable, and creative qualities of interconnection across difference" (Tsing 2005: 4). These relations include unequal power dynamics between dominant and subordinate; but, they also go beyond them: they also include more complicated relations disrupting this binary. In other words, friction highlights the enactment of power, but it also "refuses the lie that global power operates as a well-oiled machine" (Tsing 2005: 6). Talking about American-Ugandan collaboration in the field of public health, Crane argues how this field of power relations is much more complex than a relation between dominant and subordinate; it is not a "simplistic tale of 'subordinate' African science 'dominated' by powerful Western interests" (Crane 2013: 12).[3] Similarly, in discussing knowledge production through European-African academic collaborations, Whyte and Whyte (2016: 41) argue for an analytical frame which goes beyond specific binary distinctions, such as endogenous vs exogenous or universal vs local.[4] While such binaries allow to generalise and make forceful statements, Whyte and Whyte (2016) advocate for an approach – inspired by an approach based on pragmatic philosophy – which concentrates on "tensions and contradictions within, rather than oppositions between, settings" (Whyte and Whyte 2016: 41). In doing so, they advocate for an understanding of these collaborations both in their historical circumstances and practical challenges: these are key to understanding the ways in which knowledge is generated, and collaborations unfold themselves (Whyte and Whyte 2016: 42).[5] Moreover, these frictions should be seen as a way to think about realistic and viable change - in a way which allows to think beyond particular binaries (bad vs good, abrupt vs gradual), and therefore seems change as an on-gong, gradual and not necessarily linear inter-relational dynamics.[6]

As will be shown, this thinking guides as a heuristic device to analyse North-South partnerships, and think about what this means for IOB.

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[3] Crane argues how "African biomedicine may be a vehicle for American aspirations to "do" global health, but it is also a field of knowledge and practice that actively pushes back against the formulation of biomedical expertise (including HIV expertise) as a Western export" (Crane 2013: 12).

[4] In doing so, this relates to work showing, and criticising, the geography and power of knowledge, which is reproduced, but also contested, in this kind of collaborations (Adriansen et al 2016). On the one hand, a universalistic perspective argues how the promotion of higher education is key to the modernisation of Africa; whereas for other approaches, higher education collaboration are a continued form of domination and imperialism. A middle-ground situates the discussion on what constitutes legitimate scientific knowledge, the ways in which this is negotiated and contested (Adriansen et al 2016: 1).

[5] In using this approach, Whyte & Whyte (2016: 42) argue, they "try to present our colleagues as we see ourselves: attempting to navigate tensions and contradictions". By focussing on dilemmas, they aim to "reduce conditions to categorial characteristics or even caricatures" (Whyte and Whyte 2016: 42).

[6] I thank Johan Bastiaensen for suggesting this point.

The paper starts by giving an overview of 4 important frictions in North-South partnerships; and subsequently reflects on how these frictions materialize for IOB. It then discussed the implications of this for IOB's academic partnerships.

2. Frictions: an overview

2.1 Friction 1: asymmetries in North-South partnerships

While much can be – and will be – discussed about the asymmetry and inequality in academic North-South collaborations; two issues are particularly important for now.

First, the unequal power dynamics underlying what 'partnership' entails. Research has shown the difficulty of having Southern priorities represented in collaborations, with in particular the agenda-setting process as a major obstacle for development research partnerships – unable to reflect community needs or to reflect development concerns (Bradley 2008); as well as the difficulty of whom to collaborate with (Jentsch 2004).

A frequent criticism is that there are inherent unequal power-relations in the 'research value-chain', which have a fundamental impact on the division of labour in research collaborations (e.g. Marchais et al 2021). There has been an implicit – or sometimes explicit – division of tasks, with Southern partners mostly involved in the implementation of the research project and execution tasks (such as data collection) (Gunasekara 2020: 505; Marchais et al 2021), with Northern partners more with conception tasks (Gaillard 1994: 39; 57). This inequality manifest itself in a number of fields, such as the degree of danger to which Southern actors can be exposed, or the rewards which are given for the work – be it financial, academic or in the form of future career benefits.[7] The current COVID-pandemic has even further accelerated this dynamic. In a number of cases, this division of tasks is related with a lack of PhD's in the relevant departments (Kontinen et al 2015: 164), which is mirrored in the difference in academic seniority between both sides (with partners in the North for example consisting of professor or associate professors; and partners in the South of pre-doc candidates) (Gaillard 1994: 39; 57).

This attention to asymmetrical relationships is reflected in a range of international research guidelines[8], is important to debates on research integrity[9], and central in debates on decolonizing these research partnerships.

Second, and equally central in debates on decolonizing N-S partnerships, are the tensions with regards to the nature of knowledge involved. Collaborative programs have been criticised for leading to a continued dominance, and institutionalisation, of Western academic discourse in African universities (Van Rinsum 2002: 39). Who decides on the epistemological, theoretical and methodological frameworks (Gunasekara 2020: 503)? This leads to a further marginalisation of local or indigenous knowledge: the frameworks (underpinning these collaborations) have been criticised to be

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[7] See the 'Bukavu series' blogs for an in-depth discussion of these dynamics.
https://www.gicnetwork.be/silent-voices-blog-bukavu-series-eng/ (consulted 05-06-21).
[8] The Swiss Guideline of the Commission for Research Partnerships with Developing Countries (KFPE 2014), the OECD-Principles for Partnerships (2011), the Montreal Statement on Research Integrity in Cross-Boundary Research Collaborations (2013), and the recently started Research Fairness Initiative (Botti et al. 2018) (Skupien 2019 : 401).
[9] Whereas research ethics mostly refer to a scientific norms in dealing with subjects of research; research integrity refers to the ethical relationships among scientists themselves – something which has received increasing attention (Skupien 2019 : 401)..

Eurocentric (Kontinen and Nguyahambi 2020a: 220) or Northern-centric (Chasi 2020; Dannecker and Hels 2020; White 2020)[10]. This also is a disciplinary division: the multidisciplinary nature of development studies is sometimes at odds with the disciplinary interests and/or epistemic presumptions of partners in the Global South (see also Kontinen et al 2015: 162) and a lack of access to research publications and funding (Kontinen et al 2015: 166).

Both of these aspects are interlinked: a disproportional access to resources, both in terms of funding and 'legitimate' information and knowledge (Gunasekara 2020: 504) creates a hierarchy of knowledge generation. which "is not conducive to respecting the capacity and fostering the intellectual advancement of the collaborator, especially those in the global south, and reinforces the extractive nature of research" (Gunasekara 2020: 504). It however is equally important to acknowledge how this hierarchy cannot only be seen in binary terms of Northern vs Southern epistemologies – the dominance of Anglo-American knowledge in the North for example is another way in which this manifests itself (Berliner 2021); and there are multiple and different knowledges are circulating in both North and South. Nevertheless, this hierarchy of knowledge is one of the ways in which this N-S division can be reproduced and sustained, particularly in the ways in which value addition takes place (White 2020; Marchais et al 2021): data collection taking place in the South (and often 'through' the South), but only achieving the status of 'knowledge' / 'theory' or 'analysis' in or 'through' the North.

2.2 Friction 2: Academic and/or development partnerships?

Central to North-South academic partnerships is that they are a combination of academic - and development collaborations. While development studies treat development aid as objects of critique, it now has to treat it as a frame of action (Kontinen et al 2015: 160).[11] In these academic collaborations, universities are treated as development projects, using the same language, frameworks and instruments.[12] The funding instrument follows the clear logic of development aid, such as a logical framework, and an alignment with priorities of national and international development goals (Kontinen et al 2015: 160).

While there is a difference in how much each project emphasises one part over the other (academic vs development collaboration), there often is a tension between both types of collaboration. Most explicit is the tension between on the one hand an effort to emphasise academic quality[13] (with little space for capacity-building); and, on the other hand, an effort towards institutional capacity-building (Kontinen et al 2015: 158).

What both grids – the academic and the developmental one – have in common is that they prioritize Northern templates. The former aspect – the academic one – uses institutional indicators as part of 'our' (Northern) academic culture and evaluation grids: to quality for a PhD; and to publish in international journals, which aim to make our southern partners part of the international academic community (Kontinen et al 2015: 161).

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[10] Which itself mirrors the 'Anglo-American-centric' nature of the academic world (Berliner 2021)

[11] This is different for different collaborations, putting the emphasis more on one of the other, but inherently contain both. (Kontinen and Nguyahambi 2020a, b).

[12] In the words of Whyte and Whyte (2016: 55): "It requires that objectives and milestones be set and it has a framework that determines in general what activities, expenditures and procedures can and should be undertaken."

[13] At least, in a conservative definition of academic quality, excluding outreach and service delivery, and heavily focusing on publications.

Lastly, it has to be emphasised that this friction does not only play out in North-South collaborations: the discussions on the measurement of academic quality also play out in the North, in particular through its excessive emphasis on 'publish or perish' – and hence also creates frictions. Similarly, the tension between developmental and academic aims also manifests itself in the North. For example, there is a lesser valuing of partnerships with the South in academic evaluations; or the growing emphasis on 'value for money' creates a range of incentives involving short-time frames – all of which creating challenges for N-S collaborations.

2.3 Friction 3: international standards and/or local needs?

This bring us to the next friction: How to measure success in the collaboration – whose standards are being used? What counts as research, and what counts as output? How to reconcile foreign academic standards of academic research and teaching with local ones (Whyte and Whyte 2016)?

The collaborations typically consist of PhD financing, research and teaching facilities, and are mostly evaluated according to templates which evaluate publications in international journals, finished PhD's and so on- evaluation criteria mostly used in Western academia (Van Rinsum 2002: 39). In this context, the evaluation criteria have been criticised for relying on an epistemology of 'high modernity' (Van Rinsum 2002: 39) focused on 'catching up' with universities in the Global North (Whyte and Whyte 2016: 42-43). Yet, what is the tension between international standards and the needs of regional and national societies of which they are part?

This needs to be unpacked in different ways.

First, universities worldwide have different relations with the society in which they are based. Being rooted in local society, and the conviction that research should be applicable to local problems, is important in various degrees in both North and South. Some argue how generally speaking, this is more the case in the Global South, which translates itself in various community engagements (Whyte and Whyte 2016: 52). These efforts are often in juxtaposition with international academic standards: they rarely make it in international journals, and if they do so, the focus on international standards may draw away attention from local needs (Whyte and Whyte 2016: 53). Another factor contributing to this is the wider economic context in which universities operate, in which there is little time or funds for basic research – making it difficult to apply international standards (an issue developed in more detail below). As a report from the Development Studies Association (2019) on North-South partnerships emphasises, 'footprints' in local communities should be seen as equally important to academic 'outputs': 'development research should look to make a tangible positive impact at local/regional/ national level – and recognise its potential for harm' (DSA 2019: 3). Relations with non-academic actors, such as community organisations, should for example equally be valorized and acknowledged (DSA 2019: 3).

At the same time, it is important to unpack 'local' needs and knowledge: what does it consist of, and who gets to speak for it? On the one hand, there is a discussion on who gets to speak on, and represent, this knowledge – with e.g. political-economic elites representing this knowledge and needs. These can be multiple, and be used to justify many kinds of research and teaching (Whyte and Whyte 2016: 54). On the other hand, there has been literature pointing at the potential disconnect of local academic knowledge (education and research) in the Global South from local issues – with e.g. a slow process of decolonizing education systems (Croese 2020: 3; Shizha 2010; Nyanchoga 2014).

Second, and as the above already hinted at: is important not to view Northern and Southern agendas as opposite or binaries. Most universities are both concerned with international scholarship and the commitment to local needs. These 'international' standards are for example often important criteria for faculty promotions. In this context, Whyte and Whyte (2016: 55) highlight how international standards cannot be seen as strictly exogenous – but have become (at least partly) 'endogenized'. The question is therefore not about valorising exogenous or endogenous content and methods, but rather about what kinds of knowledge and methods should be chosen in these collaborations. This for example involves a discussion on the valorisation of outreach projects, and how these relate to peer-reviewed publications (Whyte and Whyte 2016: 55). In doing so, academic and development collaboration can also be interlinked: institutional capacity-building aims to set out more equal relationships, also in research practices, with the agenda no longer being determined by the North (Kontinen et al 2015: 158).

2.4 Friction 4: the political economy of research and teaching

History and context are important here: in these research collaborations – and similar to development projects - both sides depend on a context which does not depend on them, but which exerts a strong pressure on their relationship (Olivier de Sardan 2005: 139). This has to do with a range of factors, such as the historical context, and the broader economic-political context. It is impossible to give an exhaustive list of all factors influencing this relationships, but this section highlights one of these aspects: the political economy of university funding in the Global South – and Sub-Sahara Africa in particular.

The political economy in which universities are placed is profoundly influenced by their status - public vs private universities, big vs small, in the periphery of the country vs central, and so on. But, there also are some general tendencies to be identified. From the 80s and 90s onwards, many universities in the Global South – and in Africa in particular - became gradually underfunded: there was the withdrawal of the state from public universities, and the privatisation and commercialisation of universities. Mamdani (2007, 2016) did describe this process in detail for Makerere University in Uganda, highlighting the rivalry between different faculties, programs and universities, competing for students and tuition fees (Mamdani 2007). This did not only lead to a fragmentation of the faculties, but also to the integration of more students, creating a higher teaching load, or, as Whyte and Whyte (2016: 49) argue, a "constant shortage of staff and time". Lecturers are combining a wide range of courses (on weekdays and weekends), a situation through which time for research and writing has become virtually absent.

This situation – underfunding and the quest for resources – also had an impact on the nature of research: for academic staff, consultancies were a particularly interesting source of income. This in turn had a profound impact on the nature of research, which no longer was basic research, but primarily 'user-oriented' (Whyte and Whyte 2016; Olivier de Sardan 2011). In Mamdani's words: "For consultants, research is all about finding answers to problems defined by a client - consultants tend to think of research as finding answers, not formulating questions" (Mamdani 2007: 117).

The quest for donors – another source of funds – had a similar impact on the research agenda, Mamdani argues: by becoming heavily dependent on external funding, they become dependent on the donor's research agenda, which mainly promotes applied, rather than basic research (Mamdani

2007). Whyte and Whyte (2016) are less pessimistic about this: while they agree with the basic dynamics (the dependence on external donors), they claim how there still is leeway for the Southern partners in determining their own research agenda.[14]

2.5. Summing up

In sum, the above sections did highlight a range of frictions in a number of institutional fields, each with their own constraints and opportunities: Northern academic standards (with for example its emphasis on international peer-reviewed publications), international development cooperation, with its own language and expectations, the national socio-economic environment (with its low salaries), the university environment (putting emphasis on teaching), and so on (Kontinen and Nguyahambi 2020a: 236).

3. IOB's collaborations: which frictions and which modes of governance?

How do the above frictions play out in IOB's relations with its partner institutes? Below reflections make an attempt at describing these, and then suggest possible ways forward.

Friction 1: IOB as a development actor

As highlighted above, N-S academic collaborations operate at the intersection between development and academic partnerships. Similar to other development partnerships, this comes with a strong focus on technocratic elements, i.e. its own concepts, procedures, formats, deadlines, accountability mechanisms. The interviews on this issue reveal two different viewpoints. On the one hand, the vision emerged that, although it provides for a form of accountability, it equally creates a form of administrative inequality. In the words of one North promotor "a whole administrative emporium is unleashed towards the local partners". It is argued how the technicity of the collaborations and short time-frames form a stumbling block in allowing to engage with more in-depth questions on the nature of the collaboration. On the other hand, others argue how these projects can be managed jointly and transparently as jointly acquired external funding; and with Southern partners get or are used to the extensive reporting exigencies. While this does not solve unequal power relations, in-depth discussions and strategic thinking are possible; with particularly long-term mutual commitments playing an important role here.

In acting as a development actor, IOB also generates particular development (aid) effects, which are worth taking into consideration. Some interviewees highlighted elements such as the substitution effect of financial subsidies as a potential danger of the IOB collaborations: in some case(s), the Northern actors are the ones teaching and/or implementing particular education programs. In doing so, there is the danger of de facto replacing local teaching efforts.

Yet, the interviews also highlighted how these effects can be countered and/or mitigated in various ways. For example, in offering these courses (and hence, offering a particular subsidy), a joint effort can be undertaken to make the program more inclusive for specific groups of students (and/or

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[14] At the same time, Whyte and Whyte (2016) argue how the situation in Uganda is not very different from their own (in Denmark) in applying for research funding: "In terms of the degree of freedom to define one's own research topic, the conditions of our Ugandan partners are not so different from our own. We too respond to calls by funding bodies for applications under given themes; we too experience that opportunities for free individual research grants are declining". (Whyte and Whyte 2016: 50)

lecturers) - for example by offering the course for free (which e.g. is the case in Bukavu) and by paying attention to dynamics such as gender.

Others highlight a problem of what is perceived as a dependency culture: in a general context characterised by underfunding, donor-financing and -collaborations are a central part of the functioning of the partner institutes. In some cases, this has engendered a dynamic in which Southern partners are looking to have as many partnerships as possible. This can potentially generate a range of negative effects, such as on the sustainability of the collaboration – with 'sustainability' sometimes defined as finding a new donor. In turn, this has an effect on the research priorities of the universities in question – with each program establishing its own priorities.

One way of potentially mitigating this are longer-term collaborations, with a joint capacity-building perspective, allowing to better identity the priorities for both partners involved.

Friction 2: International standards vs local realities

Which standards should be applied in evaluating IOB's academic partnerships? The 'international vs local standards' friction is very much relevant here: the logic of IOB's Going Global program is for example about the internationalisation of education programs, which means that education efforts in the South become – at least to a certain extent –part of the ways in which the IOB programs are monitored and evaluated. This raises a number of questions and tensions. First, a key-tension is the extent to which our demands and standards are enforced upon institutes and actors in the Global South. Or, a different way of putting this would be: whom determines the contents of these standards, and whom sets the agenda in these? If joint programs would be established, this would entail Southern partners having to follow UA criteria. And second, there can be a tension between IOB's nature as a development studies institute and the 'traditional' disciplinary interests of many of our partner institutes (economics, political sciences, and so on). This does not only play a role for research, but also in teaching – e.g. with regards to the degrees which are expected and delivered, and the extent to which there is a match with the local partner.

Friction 3: modes of governance

Jean-Pierre Olivier de Sardan (2009) argues for an analytical and non-normative way of using the 'governance'-concept, and particularly dissecting its specific logics and norms (in part the result of the 'piling up' of different kinds of power). The result is a mixture of different modes of governance, each reflecting different layers of power and legitimacy – Olivier de Sardan for example discusses the 'chiefly', 'bureaucratic' or 'associational' modes of governance. While these modes of governance co-exist in the same socio-political space, they do not all have the same intensity or importance (Olivier de Sardan 2009: 28-29).

- Finances: the political economy of partnerships

On the one hand, for a number of our partner universities, the partnerships have a strong financial incentive: they are an important source of income for the institutions. Many operate in an institutional environment in which salaries are not consistently (or sufficiently) paid (but are rather considered as a basic income that is expected to be complemented with additional income streams) (Poncelet et al 2015). For example in the DRC, many professors combine teaching positions at different universities. N-S collaborations, such as VLIR-UOS, do fit into this logic: they are an additional possibility to tap into

financial opportunities. This implicitly - and at times explicitly - is an important driver in a number of collaborations. which at times has created tensions between the different partners.

On the other hand, while the Going Global/ VLIR collaborations offer some financial opportunities – such as salary top-ups or research grants – these remain relatively low. Some projects – not all - are not able to offer stable payments to the local coordinator, given continued unclarities in the project; and express the necessity to offer a clear perspective.

- Ideological context

Noticeable is the difference in the ideological culture and context among the different partner institutes. Some institutions – or at least, some members of these institutes – have an outspoken activist vision with regards to the partnerships and in their view on development (broadly defined); something which is much less the case for other partners. According to the partners involved, this is very much related with the particular histories, socio-political context, and political economies in which they operate. Other elements constitute for example the experience in engaging in these kind of partnerships, the level of marginalisation in the national context, or whom gets to speak for these national institutions (expats or locals). All of these play a role in the ways in which collaborations take shape and are understood. In this context, cross-sectional contacts among our South partners can be an interesting, and important element of future programs.

- Status

Prestige and status are very much part and parcel of any academic career, both at a personal and an institutional level, and both in the North and South. For a number of Southern partners, the prestige which these collaborations bring is an important element – which again has to be understood in the context of the fragmentation and privatisation of the universities, particularly in Sub-Saharan Africa. In the Democratic Republic of Congo for example, there is a demand for European lecturers teaching in particular courses, as it allows to attract more students (and hence resources), or adds to the prestige of the institution. This for example allows for an entry-point to engage in mutually supportive collaboration in other fields, such as research and outreach, and/or (as was highlighted above) collaborate on the inclusiveness and quality of the education.

- Frictions between the various modes of governance

The above highlights the variety of incentives which play out in the North-South partnerships. Interviewees mention differences in priorities among these incentives (North and South alike): –for some the interest in funding for research has priority, for others status or financial interest, or for others international mobility, or knowledge generation. This on occasion creates frictions between and within the different partners. An important question is therefore on how to reduce the tension between the different perspectives and aspirations as much as possible, in a context which is characterised by inequality. A decolonial perspective involves reducing the tensions and inequalities as much as possible in this context; and creating as much reciprocity as possible. How to reduce inequality and make sure expectations and incentives are matched? How to achieve mutual responsibility? As highlighted in the introduction, this should be perceived as an ongoing gradual, and non-linear emerging inter-relational dynamic.

Yet, the pursuit for reciprocity can sometimes create unexpected, or unwanted, results. For example, in some areas the financial need(s) of the partner universities work against collaboration with other

partner universities in the region: given their dependence on education and registration fees for their income, universities often perceive their local counterparts as competitors in a market which competes for students – a factor which reduces the interest in collaboration. Moreover, as collaboration with foreign partners is seen as a source of status and symbolic capital in the market for students, universities might prefer to keep these contacts for themselves. Yet, Northern partners might have an explicit interest in the creation of synergies – in order to maximize the developmental and/or academic impact and/or sustainability of the partnerships. This is not an either/or question, but it serves to highlight how the realization of (or rather search for) reciprocity and equality entails a difficult process, and ongoing dialogue.

Similarly, the abovementioned climate of underfunding in a number of partner regions has led to fragmentation and commercialisation, which also translates itself in competition between faculties and universities. This for example manifests itself in DR Congo: while professors work in a multitude of universities[15], institutional collaboration remains difficult. This has manifested itself on a day-to-day level in a number of collaborations, in which it for example has been difficult to invite actors from other universities for talks. A number of reasons explain this dynamic, such as the different institutional affiliations and cultures (protestant, catholic, state universities, etc) in Congolese academia, as well as the competition for students and student fees.[16]

In this context, terms such as co-creation can mean very different things for different partners (N-S, S-S), who have different priorities and incentives. This cannot be an excuse to refrain from engaging in these processes, but highlights the need to be aware of potentially different meaning and finalities of academic collaborations.

It is important to mention that these frictions are also present at IOB: in the pluriverse that are development studies institutes such as IOB, these partnerships thrive on diverse incentives and traditions, including different epistemological and ideological groundings (see Gleiberman 2021). At the same time, these collaborations/partnerships happen very much in a decentralised fashion. While this gives the necessary room to respond to the various incentives in an ad hoc manner, this decentralised manner means that these different 'modes of governance' also play out within IOB – for example with regards to epistemological and ideological approaches to these partnerships. This is e.g. reflected in the different concepts which are used to describe these partnerships, and the understanding which is given to them. For example, some actors – both at IOB and in the South – want to do away with the term 'capacity-building', whereas others – again, both in the South and at IOB – see the term as a central element to their partnerships.

A question is if there is a need for more 'centralisation' of this at IOB, a streamlining of the ways in which meaning is given to these concepts? Can, or should this be done, in the context of IOB as a 'pluriverse' or 'Baobab'? The diversity amongst both our partners and within IOB seems to suggests so; and was a central tenet of IOB's previous collaborations, leaving room for creativity, trial and error, and cross-learning.

4. What next?

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[15] See also Poncelet et al., 2015.
[16] It's important not to exoticize these dynamics – these forms of competition also happen in Northern contexts; but interviewees emphasise how these dynamics are more intense in resource-scarce contexts.

How to undo these frictions, and where to untangle them? Let's first have a look at what the literature suggests on this.

Central in reducing these frictions are what Kontinen and Nguyahambi (2020a: 228-229) call a process of 'mutual learning'. With this, they mean recognising the existing capacities and capacity benefits for both sides, as well as that knowledge production cannot come from one side. More generally, this refers to a process of being aware of the power relations (Eyben 2006), and self-reflection (Melber 2019). Ralphs and Wagner (2018) similarly argue how a 'learning approach' should be part of the project management structure as a reflexive approach to learn and reflect on the partnerships, and in particular to uncover the 'hidden interests' at individual and organisational level.

Yet, how to practically do so? The problems underlying these partnerships often go beyond the individual or even organisational level, and are often referred to as 'systemic shortcomings and imbalances' (Ishenengoma 2016a in Kontinen and Nguyahambi 2020a: 220). These are very difficult to address at the organisational or individual level. To this extent, it is useful to differentiate between the micro, meso and macro levels of these partnerships - with micro-level interactions between individuals, and macro-level wider social phenomena (Skupien 2019). The meso-level consists of social phenomena linking individuals' micro-level interactions with larger events at the macro-level; and in which "universities and research institutions are often regarded as major meso-level actors" (Skupien 2019: 398). Related with this, Kontinen and Nguyahambi (2020a) describe three levels of change:

A **first level** is "improving practices within existing institutional constellations", or, as they paraphrase 'doing better what we do' (Kontinen and Nguyahambi 2020a: 227). A potential risk and difficulty is the extent to which existing institutional constellations allow to address existing problems.

A **second level** engages with 'reforming the partnership practices', and explicitly acknowledges that the different actors have different interests, values and goals; and have to deal with 'historically formed asymmetries related to funding relationships', and acknowledging and openly deliberating the differences (Kontinen and Nguyahambi 2020a: 227), such as a lack of reciprocity and mutuality, a mismatch in motives, and conflicting agendas (Ishengoma 2016).

Lastly, it is important to mention how a **third level** engages with the broader (macro-) institutional context. This has to do with the above-mentioned frictions: how to address inequalities and asymmetries between Northern and Southern partners? These cannot be directly changed, but have a strong impact on the collaboration – such as for example indigenous vs exogenous standards or the political economy of education of Southern partners.

5. Quid IOB's academic partnerships?

It is clear that IOB needs to engage with the above frictions, and will need to do so through the above-mentioned levels: while the micro-level might be the easiest level to change things, the meso-level as the central level in which most direct and meaningful change can be made. Similar to what is describe above, joint learning should be crucial, about the nature, purpose and methodologies of the collaboration(s).

A couple of things are worth mentioning, as they were particularly emphasised during the interviews.

First, an explicit goal of IOB – in particular its Going Global process - is the globalisation of our (master) education, i.e. the active involvement of our academic partners in the South in joint teaching here and

there, which is connected to IOB's longer tradition of joint research and outreach. Doing so should allow a long-term perspective of jointly building a global network for these areas of academic activity, and to engage in negotiating a mutually or partially shared agenda with long-term institutional solidarity.

- Throughout the interviews, the importance of mobility as a two-way instrument – both for lecturers and students – was further emphasised.
- With regards to the negative development effects of our education programs (mentioned above), the importance of having direct counterparts was mentioned frequently (i.e. direct collaborations between Northern and Southern partners). Potential frictions mentioned here were i) the level of seniority between the counterpart, and ii) the disciplinary match (given the abovementioned disciplinary friction between development studies and 'traditional disciplines). These frictions could potentially jeopardize the quality of the partnership.
- Also in line with above, the importance of bringing our partners on board in the different phases of the process – from the project writing process onwards. Others mentioned the difficulty in doing so - with limited enthusiasm or contribution, or persons dropping out – as it was not part of the ways in which collaborations were understood and have been carried out. These findings are similarly mentioned by previous research[17]; but are of course no excuse for not engaging these practices.

Second, a continued strengthening of the education-research-outreach nexus has been emphasised by many, and has two advantages: (i) any strategy should take into account the above-described political economy of teaching – which should include opportunity for research. A simple focus on teaching risks becoming part of, and even amplifying, processes of commercialisation and privatisation of universities in the Global South. (ii) This process should include, and be aware of, the broader politics of knowledge production: teaching and research should be aware of, and attempt to address, local needs and knowledge(s). A number of other instruments should also be able to play an important role in this process: alumni (and alumni seminars), South-South mobility, and short-term modules or workshops.

Third, a key factor in the various interviews is that the partnerships should as much as possible focus on areas of added value (for both partners).

- A common thread for IOB was that our added value is not in BA or lower-level education programs; but should focus on MA programmes. Yet, also this was questioned: is our added value really there? Or rather in relatively uncovered issues, such as a PhD program (see the textbox below)?
- Some voiced the possibility of engaging in a more flexible program, in which various institutions participate. This would allow for the creation of synergies between various universities and other partners – which can be both academic and non-academic. A danger

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[17] Kontinen and Nguyahambi (2020) similarly emphasise the importance of involvement throughout the process, but highlight the challenges in doing so. example, one attempt at a collaborative open approach at research was met with suspicion, with the Southern partners wondering 'whether the northern partners actually had any idea what the project was supposed to be about' (Kontinen and Nguyahambi 2020: 228), based on previous experiences in which 'Southern participants expected to be provided clear advice and ready-made tools to be used in data collection' (Kontinen and Nguyahambi 2020: 228). In other words, there is a danger at path-dependency – which of course cannot be an excuse for avoiding to engage in this approach.

here is above-mentioned competition between different institutions. national universities, which are competing for the same 'market'. That being said, this does not exclude collaborations, and still allows for south-south cooperation, exposure, and so on.

Lastly, throughout the interviews, a number of factors were mentioned which were deemed important in the potential success of this process of mutual learning, and the ways in which the above frictions can be addressed (all of which play out at this meso-level).

- The duration of the partnership: there is a consensus that long-term relations and careful institutional nurturing are key to successful partnerships and in reducing inequalities. While the current institutional set-up of Going Global and VLIR-UOS is not ideal in this context, these funding modalities can constitute important intermediary steps in reaching such a long-term partnerships. The length of these partnerships and/or the will to collaborate in the longer term allows to better learn and navigate mutual institutional cultures and political context, and develop the level of trust between both partners.
- The political-social context at university level: At the university-level, local processes of power and politics are important. These are often difficult to understand or penetrate. The duration of the partnership is often important here[18].
- The importance of personal links, and particularly of bridging figures was emphasised: 'hybrid' persons who are, or have been, connected both to IOB and the partner institute, and bridge between the North and South. Often these actors are (MA or PhD) alumni of IOB; with whom there are more established links. They are able to better navigate the institutional cultures and various modes of governance on both sides of the relation.[19]

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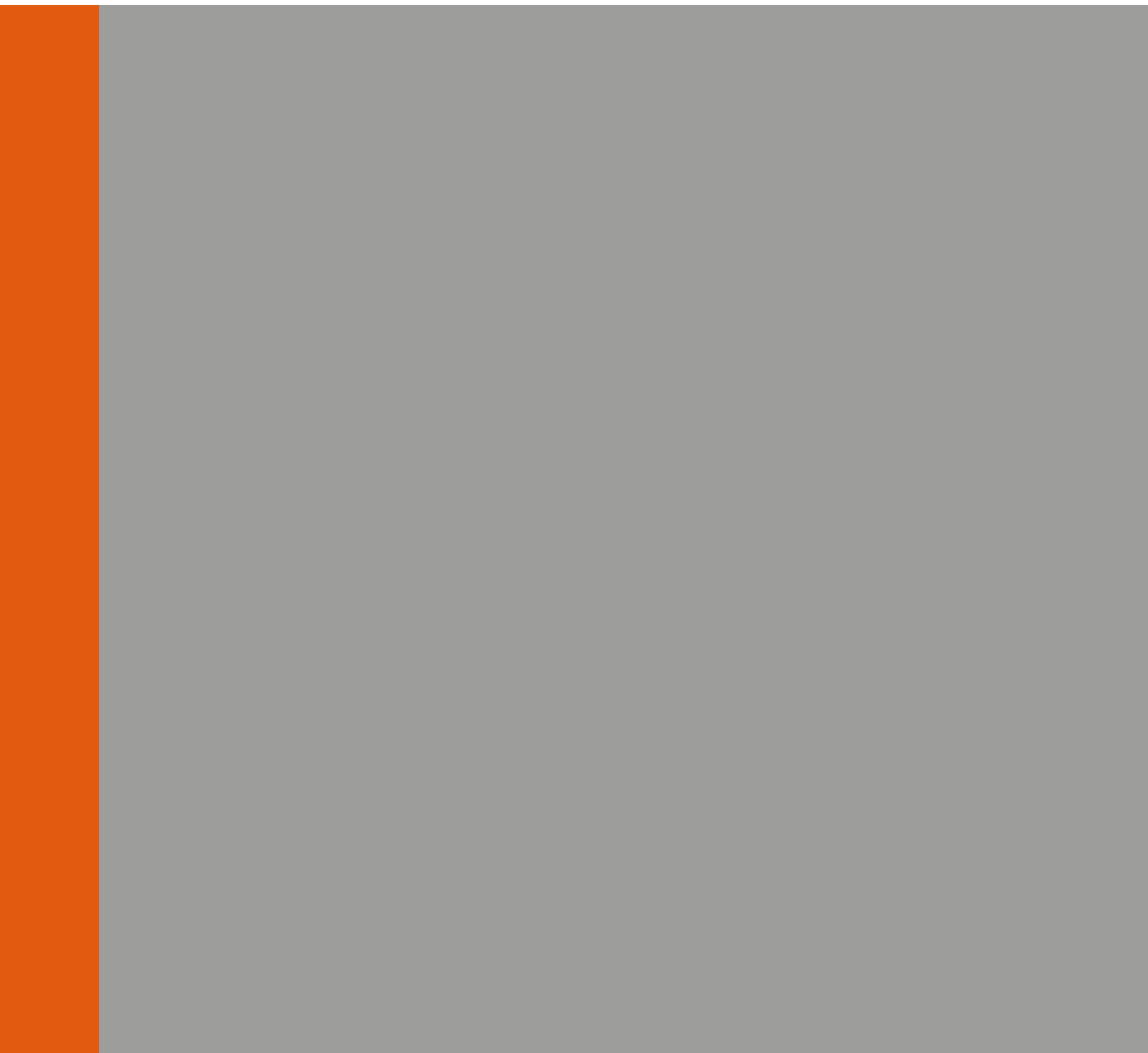
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[18] A problem which was mentioned often in this context is the tension between institutional and individual incentives: individuals operate often in difficult institutional circumstances, in which tensions emerge with superiors or colleagues. Two questions are important here: i) How far does a relation need to go in engaging with these institutional politics? A minimum level of engagement with these power dynamics is unavoidable, but is the aim of a project to address these? For example, in case there are highly hierarchical or exploitative relations which go against the aims of the project? ii) A key question is which level to focus on in the relation with universities: to which extent do you focus on or involve the central level?

[19] These personal linkages are a double-edged sword: on the one hand, they entail an inherent instability. The departure of bridging figures, or of other key-figures might threaten a project. On the other hand, they can also allow for positive change. For example, a new university dean might change things/ make things more possible.

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