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# International higher education partnerships and the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs)

July 2021

Main results of a study by the British Council and the Association of Commonwealth Universities



**International higher education partnerships contribute significantly to the United Nations' Sustainable Development Agenda 2030 and its 17 SDGs.**

Clear links between partnerships' activities and outcomes and the SDGs can be found in practically all mapped partnerships. Partnerships are relevant for all 17 SDGs, with SDG4 (quality education) and SDG17 (partnerships for the goals) emerging more strongly than others.<sup>1</sup>



1. In total, the study mapped 110 international higher education partnerships, from different world regions, funded by a variety of donors and focusing on a wide range of activities. The mapping did not aim at providing a comprehensive list of all international higher education partnerships globally. Instead, it aimed at capturing the diversity of the partnership landscape.



**While sometimes we are obliged to select priorities for our interventions, we cannot prioritise individual SDGs. The SDGs are interlinked. One cannot be achieved without the others. For example, education is a goal in itself, but other SDGs contain education-related issues too.**







UNESCO India

**Partnerships have two ways in which they perform their function of contributing to the SDGs through their outcomes:**





As contributors to the knowledge base. These are often research partnerships offering practicable solutions but no implementation or scale-up in practice

As implementors of new knowledge. These are often teaching and learning partnerships conducting research, but also implementing the results in practice (e.g. within their partner organisations)

**Drivers of the contribution of international HE partnerships to the SDGs:**

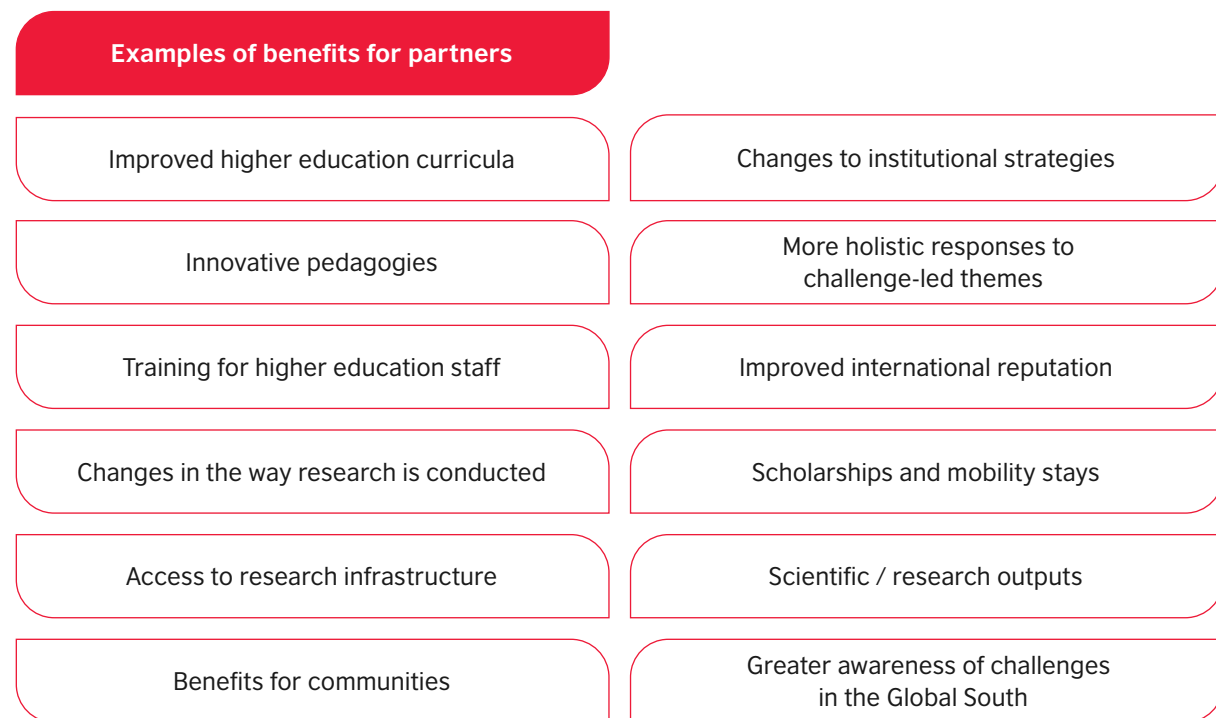
-  Mutual trust and open communication among the partners
-  Shared vision and long-term commitment to working together
-  Engagement of the senior HEI leadership
-  Flexibility of funders, donors and fund managers
-  National-level quality assessment criteria and international university rankings
-  Good risk management

**Challenges to the contribution of international HE partnerships to the SDGs:**

-  Covid-19 pandemic
-  Complex governance structures at HEIs and resistance to change
-  Insufficient capacity to manage international projects at partner institutions
-  Volatility of the funding environment and reliance on short-term funding

**Monitoring and measuring the contribution to the SDGs remain a big issue for the international community. Data collection systems need significant improvements across the globe.**

International higher education partnerships are beneficial for partners from the Global South, as well as for partners from the Global North.



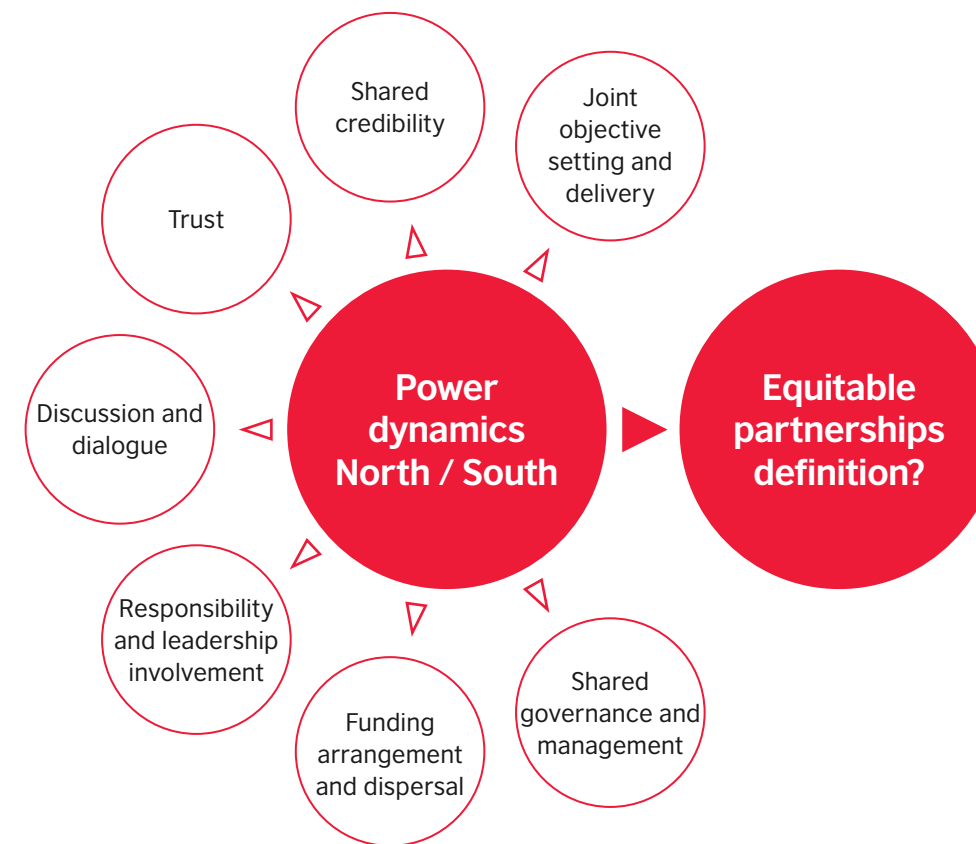
Currently, the SDGs are rarely explicitly referenced in the strategies and plans of international higher education partnerships, but are at least complementary with the agreed upon priorities and objectives. In addition, the SDGs are seen, by partners, as a useful overarching framework and universally applicable in many contexts and at different levels.

It is highly likely that donors' funding programmes will make direct links to the SDGs more often in the future, and, therefore, more partnerships will reference the SDGs in their objectives.



### Equity and international higher education partnerships

There is no generally recognised definition of an “equitable partnership” and there are no set criteria for measuring how equitable international higher education partnerships are.



The partnership model provides a unique added value to the investment of international donors and funders.

-  Mobilising more resources together
-  Complementing each other's expertise and experience
-  Providing more opportunities for mutual learning, networking and increasing visibility
-  Addressing wider societal issues more efficiently
-  Bringing different types of organisations together (higher education institutions, public sector bodies, NGOs, private companies and others)
-  Reducing financial and project management risks
-  Increasing prospects of future successful funding applications

## Implications for funders

- **Designing programmes with a view of embeddedness of the SDGs.** Embedding the SDGs will require actions on funders' side, especially when it comes to the programming design
- **Supporting partnerships in monitoring and evaluation of the progress towards the SDGs.** Funders have considerable power that they can use to support partnerships in improving their monitoring and evaluation capacity
- **Emphasising the crucial role of Southern partners in setting the agenda and governance models for North-South partnerships.** Funders can support a higher degree of involvement of Southern partners through focusing on capacity building pre application (e.g. by providing fundamental training for objective setting, management and proposal writing)
- **Further exploring what an “equitable partnership” should look like.** More research will be necessary in order to bring this experience from various funders together and explore what more could be done to increase equity
- **Considering longer-term support over shorter-term contracts.** Although there are examples of when partnerships can successfully bridge periods without external funding, longer-term funding contracts allow time for the mutual trust between the partners to fully develop and for the outcomes to materialise
- **Supporting partnership platforms and informing other funders what research has already been conducted.** Funders (e.g. through the Donor Harmonisation Group) can further explore how building and supporting partnership platforms bringing partnerships from different programmes and funders together to share good practice and results can help mitigate the risk of overlaps and help better focus the resources
- **Recognising the long-term consequences of the Covid-19 pandemic.** Fewer opportunities to meet in person may lead to fewer new partnerships established in the future. Funders can consider organising networking events, workshops and increasing visibility of funding opportunities locally so that new actors can form partnerships more easily in the future

## Implications for higher education institutions (HEIs) in the UK

- **Considering the equity in benefits stemming from international higher education partnerships.** Northern partners (including HEIs in the UK) can consider providing increased support to their Southern partners in academic writing, joint authorship of scientific articles and peer review processes
- **Identifying benefits stemming from international higher education partnerships.** HEIs in the Global North (including in the UK) can consider putting more effort on identifying expected benefits for their own institutions, academics, students, as well as for their stakeholders and communities in order to better showcase the added value of their involvement in partnerships
- **Exploring how successful participation in international higher education partnerships can be built upon further.** HEIs in the UK can capitalise on their long-term experience with North-South partnerships in their effort to integrate the SDGs internally in their institutional strategies and policies. Guidance and good practice examples in this area are emerging and could be used as source of inspiration



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The Association of Commonwealth Universities (ACU) is an international organisation dedicated to building a better world through higher education. We believe that international collaboration is central to this ambition. By bringing universities together from around the world – and crucially the people who study and work within them – we help to advance knowledge, promote understanding, broaden minds, and improve lives.

Through our support for equitable partnerships between our global network of members that result in shared and equal outcomes for all partners, we expand opportunities and strengthen higher education across the Commonwealth and beyond. To find out more, visit [www.acu.ac.uk](http://www.acu.ac.uk).

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