

North-south partnerships in higher education: the changing climate and current issues in the UK

Judy Powell, Director Higher Education, The British Council, London

In this paper I want to consider interaction between higher education institutions in the north and south and the potential for building cooperation that is not based on traditional donor-recipient relationships. Although development funding targeted at HE has been decreasing in many donor countries, there may be alternative methods of engagement, founded more on partnership. The result might be more mutually beneficial dialogue and cooperation, and wider recognition and awareness of what might hitherto have been regarded as a rather self-contained area of activity. In the UK the Department for International Development (DFID) has as its central focus a commitment to poverty reduction and to working with other governments toward the MDGs. HE development activity has been regarded as fairly peripheral to this agenda, but in 2004 DFID took the welcome decision to renew the Higher Education Links programme for a further 7 years. I shall be considering the issues relating to the successor HEL programme later in this paper but first want to look at the wider picture.

The delivery of expert services has been the model for much of the development work traditionally carried out by higher education institutions from the northern hemisphere. Over the years universities have won contracts, both from their various national development ministries and from international agencies, for project management or service delivery in specialist areas. Since UK institutions have become accustomed to operating in a bidding culture it is not surprising to find that our universities, colleges or consortia of education institutions have been well represented in capacity building projects in central and Eastern Europe and in the southern hemisphere. Fixed term contracts for the one-way transmission of expertise are not designed to foster long term institution to institution partnerships and the fact that lasting relationships have occasionally been formed is a testament to the commitment of the individuals concerned. In recent years this contractual project approach to capacity building has been falling out of favour and DFID has been concentrating on multilateral aid to overseas governments engaged in reform programmes leading to the achievement of MDGs.

Society outside the donor community has also been changing, and it might be useful to reflect on some of the influences, trends and attitudes to north-south cooperation in the wider public arena. I am basing these observations on the UK but suspect that some at least will be valid for other northern countries.

For much of the general public, perceptions of the developing world are largely conditioned by the media, and public consciousness and consciences have been stirred by successive high profile campaigns that draw our attention to human tragedies resulting from poverty, famine, disease, natural disaster and conflict. These campaigns have succeeded in putting over to thinking people some key messages about our individual and collective responsibilities in a global environment and have provoked public responses

which in turn have strengthened the political response. Inevitably the media focus on emergencies can lead to the impression that the developing world is synonymous with 'problems', but one more positive lesson that appears to have been absorbed is the need for long term strategies and sustainable infrastructures rather than short term crisis resolution.

It is always risky to make generalisations about social trends but one of the effects of globalisation appears to be a heightened sense of social responsibility in certain sections of the community in the northern hemisphere. This manifests itself in a number of ways: students are likely to place a strong priority on working for socially responsible employers; companies, including some high profile multinationals, have become aware of the need for policies on sustainable growth and ethical investment. Of course, it can be argued that at least some of this is window dressing because it makes good business sense, but at least we can be sure that information about malpractice or environmental catastrophe reaches the public domain very quickly, thanks to the internet and the media.

The interdependence that results from globalisation means that moral duty and self interest often happen to coincide. The Commission for Africa and the forthcoming G8 discussions have had the effect of placing the debate about aid, debt relief and measures for sustainable regeneration at centre stage on the political agenda. In the UK this is leading to more consultation amongst different departments of government which, a few years ago, would have either regarded active involvement in international cooperation as outside their remit, or at least would not have seen the relevance of a joined up approach. Over the years we have seen publications from (what is now) the Department for Education and Skills (DfES) placing increasing emphasis firstly on the European context then the wider international dimension and global citizenship in the national curriculum. DfES is now developing its own Africa strategy which will take up the specific educational recommendations in the Commission for Africa report. As part of this emerging strategy DfES is working with the Association of Commonwealth Universities on a ten year plan for partnerships between universities in Africa and universities in the developed countries of the Commonwealth.

This increased emphasis from DfES on international partnerships has resulted in the publication of the first-ever DfES international strategy. One of the objectives of the corporate DfES strategy is to place learning in a global context and as key concepts it refers to citizenship, social justice, sustainable development, diversity, values and perceptions, interdependence, conflict resolution, human rights. Another objective is to engage in international partnerships, with reference to both EU and world wide partners. A particular priority is 'to share expertise and resources to contribute to the improvement of education and children's services in the developing world, particularly in Africa'. In the discussions with other government departments and organisations following this strategy paper, DfES has been emphasising the contribution which HE makes to development, and the way in which the sector might help the south to strengthen its lifelong learning provision. A few years ago it would have been almost unthinkable that

a Department of Education would be setting forward its priorities on areas which would have been seen as the exclusive concern of international development.

Within the northern hemisphere, and particularly within the European Union, we are accustomed to interaction and exchange in all sectors of education. Schools and colleges routinely undertake joint activities on the basis of shared objectives, benefits and resource commitment, with electronic communication playing a major role. For the HE community the transnational nature of knowledge and the knowledge society means that international discourse and cooperation are self evidently a core part of their mission and tradition. Yet sustained partnerships between north and south higher education institutions are difficult – indeed impossible in some cases- because of the fragility of infrastructures and lack of capital investment in some southern countries.

The enormity of the challenges and the economic difficulties should not lead us to assume that there is no shared agenda for genuine partnership. Although the context varies enormously, I would suggest that almost all countries, whatever their stage of development, are facing fundamental challenges in relation to higher education. Some of the issues are remarkably similar, whatever the context, and relate to the role and purpose of HE in society. There are no easy answers in any country, but there might be more common ground than at first appears, and we need to be sharing our experience.

We know that systems cannot be transplanted from one country to another. This is hardly surprising when we consider that many developed countries have systems that have evolved in piecemeal fashion over the years; others have legacies which no longer fit their needs and most of us have tried to accommodate inconsistencies in a way which would not have happened if we were starting afresh.

One of the immediate practical steps we can take is to encourage the exchange of views between specialists in the north and south. This is something we try to do within the British Council and we are aiming to support and follow such discussion through strategic interaction, based on regional planning. HE is just one of many areas of activity throughout the world, and the priority attached to HE partnerships varies from region to region. The British Council is not a funding agency, still less a development agency, and inevitably there are limitations on the resources that can be devoted to any one activity area or country. Over and above our grant aided activity that is supported by the Foreign and Commonwealth Office (FCO), British Council offices have managed contracts for DFID, many involving HE cooperation and technical assistance. These contracts where DFID is the client have contributed to a perception (by no means confined to the British Council) that any activity related to capacity building and educational reform must necessarily come under the aid agenda, and is therefore the sole responsibility of DFID.

However there is nothing in the nature of experience and knowledge sharing that requires an ‘aid’ label. Professional interaction is not in itself a matter for development agencies, although the consultation process and the outcomes of discussions may help policy makers in the south to make informed decisions about their own needs, and then to

develop strategies that may well include submissions to donor agencies for infrastructure funding and capital investment.

From British Council meetings, seminars and workshops a number of themes emerge that are of common interest. These themes include institutional leadership, governance, autonomy, accountability, resource management, quality assurance, staff development. In some cases we find that a forum for multilateral discussion is more productive than bilateral dialogue and there would seem to me to be considerable scope for more expert gatherings and training workshops where a range of different experiences can be considered. We have also found that trans-regional points of comparison can be useful, as for instance, when the Chinese experience of rapid capacity building was discussed at a recent AAU workshop.

It is important to be able to share not only our successes and best practice, but also our less successful efforts and our uncertainties. We can also identify some common misconceptions – from advice seekers and advice givers - about needs and solutions. This can otherwise result in the inappropriate investment by the developing country of its scarce resources. I have recently, for instance, come across one proposal for sponsoring MBA scholars as a means of building and managing infrastructures, and another for investing in IT and distance learning, without staff training, as a delivery mechanism for reaching more students.

In reviewing cooperation from a UK perspective I have left until last our Higher Education Links programme, funded by DFID. The recent evaluation of the current programme and the ongoing discussion about its successor, to be known as Development Partnerships in Higher Education (DEPHE) are focussing our attention on the core purpose, impact and ownership of links. In parallel with this discussion about the new DEPHE programme, we are in the process of celebrating the achievements of the existing programme over a period of 25 years. Some of the outcomes have been remarkable and achieved with very low levels of investment. Although the timescale of the link is normally three years (extendable to a maximum of six), some partnerships have been maintained for over fifteen years. Collaborative work and close personal contacts have continued uninterrupted over this period without any ongoing subsidy.

Over the 25 years of the HEL programme's existence there have been shifts of emphasis leading towards far more attention on the policy framework. HEL were never intended as a means of building up HE institutional capacity in the south although individual departments in southern partner institutions have certainly been strengthened. The links have entailed collaboration between at least two higher education institutions– a minimum of one in the UK and one overseas - in areas which will benefit the community. The nature of the collaborative activity varies: in some cases it has been classroom based, in the sense that training courses for teachers, nurses, health professionals and others have been developed. Some links have concentrated on outreach work with local communities, for instance helping to redress gender inequalities by involving more women in the political process. Many links have been research-based and have benefited communities

through the application and dissemination of appropriate expertise in areas such as water management, pesticide control, medical diagnostic techniques and tropical disease treatment.

Most of us will recall that in the period prior to the publication of the World Bank's report, *Constructing Knowledge Societies*, donor agencies, including DFID, felt that HE was a low priority when set against universal primary education (UPE) targets; moreover some southern higher education institutions were accused of maintaining elitist, corrupt systems that drained resources away from the poorest people. HEL were therefore required to justify themselves against strict adherence to the MDGs and although it was possible to argue that the programme was helping to create an environment in which MDGs would be more likely to be achieved and sustained, there was a period when a more immediate and literal MDG-related outcomes were required. Happily, wiser counsels and more long term views have now prevailed in the interpretation of MDG relevance, but explicit HE- strengthening objectives lie outside the scope of the scheme.

DFID has outlined the parameters for the new programme and indicated the areas where change and improvement might be made. The geographical focus will be the 25 countries where DFID has bilateral partnership agreements, with sub Saharan Africa a particular priority. There might be scope for south-south links, trans-regional links, partnerships involving other northern hemisphere countries and larger consortia for certain projects. (Since UK aid is untied, the participation of a UK higher education institutions is not a requirement as far as DFID is concerned.) There is a debate to be had about the relative importance of research-led knowledge transfer as against training delivery and skills development. Gender equality is a key theme, and views are sought about how this can best be addressed. As at present, all project proposals will be submitted by the overseas institution. DFID wants to see more emphasis on evaluation, follow up and dissemination and would like to have a closer relationship between the scholarship programmes and the DEPHE. (Both the DFID Commonwealth Scholarship and Fellowship programme and the FCO Chevening programme are also being reviewed).

The design of the new programme is not solely a matter for DFID, however, since the UK HE sector is a major stakeholder and funding partner. UK higher education institutions have been vociferous in their commitment to HEL and its continuation. They do not receive any direct funding from DFID but the international travel and accommodation costs for UK staff are covered by the overseas institution from its DFID grant. The estimated investment by the higher education institution in staff time and equipment far outweighs the DFID contribution.

This shared commitment is possible as long as there is a sufficiently close match between HE and DFID objectives. Higher education institutions are not in business to deliver on the MDGs but they are committed to north-south partnerships which fulfil their own global mission and also to joint research which enriches their knowledge and research base through field work. They are interested too in helping with institutional capacity building and long term cooperation, and a mapping of departmental links over the years

might provide a foundation on which to consolidate institutional development. More links in the fields of science and technology would be of interest to the university sector, and this is also going to be a UK government priority. Some higher education institutions would probably like to continue working with Indian Ocean countries that were affected by the tsunami and which are not all included on DFID's list.

An added complexity arises because the British Council is the managing agency for HEL and the designated agency for DEPHE but is also, by virtue of its overseas network, a contributing partner, with British Council staff providing local management support. Because the British Council is the immediately visible agency on the ground, HEL is often thought to be our programme, rather than DFID's.

The discussions on which we are embarking about DEPHE touch on key issues about the nature of partnership, the role of HE in development and the setting of the agenda. These discussions will determine the precise focus of the new programme, which we hope will start in late 2005. This Nuffic expert meeting comes at a particularly opportune moment in terms of this consultation, and I welcome the view expressed by DFID that in the northern countries we should be looking at the ways in which our various programmes complement each other. DfES has made a similar point about the desirability of partners in the north working together and pooling their efforts to support capacity building in education systems in the south. Southern partners need to be able to make informed choices from other systems about what might or might not be appropriate to their own particular needs. Regional networks in the south, such as NEPAD, SADC and specific HE groupings such as AAU are already opening the way for southern partners to disseminate ideas and experience, and engage in proactive strategic planning.

I have suggested in this paper that we should welcome the wider political and global awareness that appears to be extending the boundaries of the debate about aid and north-south cooperation. However vital the funding and the role of donor agencies, their agendas are not the only ones and we should take advantage of the opportunities for partnership that draw on HE's unique facility for extending the knowledge and skills base, upholding free speech, critical analysis and democratic values and interacting with the wider community.

Judy Powell
6 May 2005