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# Role of international higher education partnerships in contributing to the sustainable development goals

Final Report for the  
British Council and  
Association of  
Commonwealth  
Universities



# Executive summary

This study, prepared between March and July 2021, aimed to understand the role of international higher education partnerships in contributing to realising the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs).

## Embeddedness of the Sustainable Development Agenda in the design of international partnerships

There is a complementary relationship between the strategies and plans of international higher education partnerships and the SDGs. The SDGs are rarely explicitly referenced but can be seen within the priorities and objectives. In addition, the SDGs are seen as a useful overarching framework and universally applicable in many contexts and at different levels. Where partnerships do not directly work with the SDGs, they often reference national, regional, and/or local strategies, which in turn are linked directly to the SDGs, e.g. Agenda 2063 for Africa.

It is highly likely that donors' funding programmes will make direct links to the SDGs more often in the future, and we will, therefore, see more international partnerships referencing the SDGs in the coming years.

## Equity among partners and mutual benefits stemming from international 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. Nevertheless, there are several factors that influence the degree of equity among partners. The choice of partners influences equity considerably. Partnerships in which the partners have worked together for a long time engender an environment of mutual trust and understanding, which supports equity. Nevertheless, this makes it more difficult for new players to engage in equitable partnerships.

There are challenges linked to equity, especially for partners in the Global South. Northern higher education institutions are still often seen as more credible with funders by their counterparts in the Global South and, therefore, Northern partners tend to come to partnerships from a stronger negotiation position than Southern partners. The perceived credibility issue is linked to how funding arrangements influence equity. Taking a lead role remains challenging for Southern partners because funders often prefer (and sometimes even require) Northern partners to lead due to accountability and audit rules.

Equity in setting partnership objectives and delivery models is somewhat separate from equity in grant management. There is a growing emphasis on giving a more equitable and prominent role to Southern partners and funders increasingly push for demonstrating the equity in project proposals. Nevertheless, challenges remain, especially due to lack of capacity in some Southern partners. There is still a need for funders to provide more support for capacity building pre application.

July 2021

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There are a number of benefits which derive from international higher education partnerships, both for Northern and Southern partner institutions. The benefits for Southern partners are much better defined and documented than for Northern partners and typical examples include new curricula, innovations in pedagogy and training for academics. The benefits often extend beyond the partnerships, into the community.

Benefits for Northern partners remain less well mapped and understood. This could be partially explained by a lower awareness and exploration of the benefits in the Global North (and for Northern partners) stemming from international higher education partnerships. However, they are possible to synthesise and Figure 1 presents selected examples of the various benefits stemming from partnerships, both for Southern and Northern partners.

**Figure 1** - Examples of benefits for partners from the Global South and Global North

Improved higher education curricula	Changes to institutional strategies
Innovative pedagogies	More holistic responses to challenge-led themes
Training for higher education staff	Improved international reputation
Changes in the way research is conducted	Scholarships and mobility stays
Access to research infrastructure	Scientific / research outputs
Benefits for communities	Greater awareness of challenges in the Global South

Source: Technopolis; with information from UUKi (2020) *Impact of ODA funding*

There are also risks of unequal benefits, in particular in research partnerships, because Northern partners tend to gain more recognition of the results

for academic publication, which then could generate spill over benefits at the institutional level (e.g. evidence for REF submission).


















## Contribution of international HE partnerships to the SDGs

Overall, the research shows that international higher education partnerships contribute significantly to the UN's Sustainable Development Agenda 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. The research identified many specific partnership activities and outcomes relevant for each SDG, which were studied in depth in the case studies and aggregated in the report.

**Figure 2** - Overview of specific outcomes through which the partnerships contribute to the SDGs (based on the mapping of partnerships)

SDGs		How partnerships contribute (summary)
	No poverty	Access to education
	Zero hunger	Research on agri-food, nutrition and sustainable consumption
	Good health and well-being	Research on various health topics, services scale-up, communication campaigns
	Quality education	Curriculum development, infrastructure investment, academic and student mobility
	Gender equality	Women's position in academia, tackling sexual violence and feminine healthcare
	Clean water and sanitation	Dam building, ecosystem management, equitable water use
	Affordable and clean energy	Training engineering lecturers, renewable energy themes in education
	Decent work and economic growth	Working conditions, equal pay, HEI-industry collaboration
	Industry, innovation and infrastructure	Locally relevant innovation in production, logistics

SDGs		How partnerships contribute (summary)
	Reduced inequalities	Access to labour markets, research on employability
	Sustainable cities and communities	Community outreach, solutions to local challenges
	Responsible consumption and production	Innovation in agriculture, sustainable production principles
	Climate action	Climate change research, pathways to sustainable greenhouse gas emissions
	Life below water	Maritime research
	Life on land	Research on ecosystems
	Peace, justice and strong institutions	Development and transformation of institutions
	Partnerships for the goals	Contribution to how partnerships can be more impactful in the future

The SDGs are also interlinked, reflecting the importance of interdisciplinary approaches to tackle wider societal issues. One SDG cannot be achieved in isolation and International higher education partnerships are better equipped than single organisations, to address societal issues because they bring together various types of partners from various disciplines and various sectors.

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)

International higher education partnerships involve organisations working together, typically with external funding (or funding derived from their own sources). There are a number of important drivers identified in the study which can be described as enabling conditions for contribution to the SDGs:

- An environment of mutual trust and open communication among the partners
- A shared vision and long-term commitment to working together
- The engagement of the senior higher education institution (HEI) leadership in the partnership, through endorsement or active participation
- An in-built flexibility in the funders, donors and fund managers
- The existence of national-level quality assessment criteria and international university rankings which assign value to the SDGs
- Good risk management within the partnerships

Furthermore, external funders can exercise considerable power over the funded partnerships, which influences on the partnerships' contribution to the SDGs. Some of the traditional donors in the Global North are going to put more emphasis in their next programming periods on ensuring that their funded portfolio directly contributes to the SDGs. This will be reflected in funders' operations through funding application processes, as well as through interim and ex-post monitoring.

The study has also identified challenges to the contribution to the SDGs:

- Covid-19 pandemic (those partnerships set up before the Covid-19 pandemic tend to continue, however new ones may find it more difficult to form due to reduced opportunities to make contacts. We may see fewer new partnerships in the months and years coming unfortunately)
- 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 (reliance on short-term project funding poses a significant challenge for many international higher education partnerships, especially for the sustainability of their results. It is important that the partnerships consider diverse opportunities for funding a variety of funding sources.)

Monitoring and measuring the contribution to the SDGs remain a big issue for the international community. The SDG indicators are in place, however, data collection systems need significant improvements across the globe. Some funders have their own monitoring mechanisms but there are generally not harmonised and, therefore, more effort is necessary in this area.

### Added value of the partnership model

The evidence provides clear indications that international aid interventions taking the form of an international partnership deliver added value, compared to other forms of international aid provision. It helps mobilise more resources and complement each other's expertise within the partnership. Furthermore, it provides more opportunities for mutual learning, networking and increasing visibility.

Partnerships also provide a platform for facilitating collaboration between different types of organisations as they bring them together around common and mutual objectives. Working together helps reduce financial and project management risks and also increases the prospects for future funding.

In this respect, the involvement of higher education institutions in international partnerships can be seen as providing an added value in itself. Higher education institutions are able to bring different types of partners (e.g. public sector organisations, NGOs, private companies and others) and work with them on common goals.

## Higher education and sustainable development: building on the success of international higher education partnerships

In tackling the societal challenges locally, newly-established partnerships are often not aware of what has already been achieved elsewhere and so they tend to start from the beginning. This brings risks of duplicities and inefficiencies in addressing the SDGs. In this respect, the role of the Donor Harmonisation Group, which is an informal network of European agencies that administer aid programmes in education, can be key to mitigate these risks. Partnership platforms, a relatively recent phenomenon, can serve as another mitigation way as they bring various partnerships together to share knowledge and good practice (e.g. the IAU HESD Cluster and the UN Office for Partnerships).

Higher education institutions involved in successful partnerships are often those that also adopted institutional reforms internally. This is because participation in partnerships help institutions become more open, internationalised and able to integrate the SDGs within their institutions. There exist recent examples of how universities approach the sustainable development agenda internally and how the SDGs can be integrated in institutional strategies and policies. This is perhaps more challenging in the Global South than in the Global North, however partnerships can act as a leverage by engaging public sector, private sector etc around common objectives

## Methodology of the study

The study was built on a mix-method approach. It made use of both primary and secondary data. The collected and reviewed data included academic and grey literature on higher education and international development, as well as on international higher education partnerships. Primary research took a funnel approach, starting with an identification and mapping of the global international higher education partnership landscape, and continuing with a set of in-depth case studies of selected partnerships. Key informant interviews with funders, academics and other stakeholders complemented the primary data.

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# 1. Introduction



This report represents the final deliverable of the study on the Role of international higher education partnerships in contributing to the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), which was commissioned by the British Council and the Association of Commonwealth Universities (ACU), and undertaken by Technopolis and King's College London (KCL).

The report is structured as follows:

- The remainder of this chapter presents the purpose and scope of this study
- Chapter 2 describes the design and conduct of this evaluation
- Chapter 3 presents the findings. The findings are laid out in the form of discussion and answers to the research questions
- Chapter 4 presents the implications from the study for higher education institutions and for funding bodies in the UK

There are three annexes to this report, including the full case studies, analysis of the partnership mapping and the list of interviewees.

## Purpose of the study

The primary objective of the study was to understand the role of international higher education partnerships in contributing to realising the sustainable development goals. The sub-objectives of the study were the following:

- To interrogate how international cooperation has enabled success, and identify lessons for institutional practice (with a focus on equity and sustainability in partnership development)
- To distil how international collaboration makes possible levels of impact that would not be achievable within national boundaries
- To build understanding of the steps that partners take to consider the context of all partner institutions
- To increase understanding of the relevance of the SDGs to how institutional internationalisation priorities are framed (and the drivers for this)

## Scope of the study

The study covered a broad variety of international higher education partnerships. The scope was not limited to any particular geographic area, as long as at least one partner organisation was domiciled in the Global South. The study, therefore, considered North-South and South-South partnerships. Furthermore, the following selected countries highlighted in the UK's International Education Strategy were of particular interest: India, Indonesia, Pakistan, Nigeria and Vietnam. This was reflected in the mapping component of the study, case studies and the choice of interviewees. Partnerships with an involvement of a UK organisation were given consideration in the mapping and the selection of the case studies, albeit while maintaining the necessary geographical diversity. As the study covered only international partnerships, only those partnerships where the partners came from at least two countries were included.

The types of partnerships within the scope included the following:

- Partnerships with two or more partner organisations of any types (i.e., higher education institutions, research institutes, governments and their agencies, NGOs, private sector organisations, community organisations etc.) were included, as long as at least one partner was a higher education institution
- Government-to-government partnerships were outside the scope, as were individual-to-individual partnerships
- Partnerships focusing on teaching and learning (including partnerships providing international scholarships), on research, innovation and on the third mission of higher education (e.g. community engagement) were included





# 2. Methodological note



## 2.1. Design of the study

The study followed a pragmatic, mixed-methods approach, making use of available evidence from both primary and secondary (qualitative and quantitative) sources to arrive at a robust and

transparent assessment of the contribution of international higher education partnerships to the SDGs.

Figure 3 provides an overview of the research questions.

**Figure 3** - Research questions aligned to the final report headings / sections

Research question as per Terms of Reference	Final report heading / section
What steps can partnering institutions take to ensure that relationships are equitable?	Equity among partners and mutual benefits stemming from partnerships
What steps can partnering institutions take to ensure that relationships are mutually beneficial?	
What steps can partnering institutions take to ensure that relationships are sustainable?	Sustainability of the international HE partnerships
To what extent is such impact intended and built into partnership approaches from the beginning? (What are the drivers behind such intended impact?)	Embeddedness of the Sustainable Development Agenda in the design of the partnerships
There is evidence of how teaching partnerships (for instance through TNE) contribute to sustainable development and strengthen local capacity and capabilities, but how widespread is this impact of TNE? And what models of TNE are best suited to contributing to SDGs?	Contribution of international HE partnerships to the SDGs
What forms of international research collaboration have had the most positive impact on sustainable development?	
What evidence exists of how other forms of an institution's global engagement may impact on sustainable development?	
How have international partnerships had an impact at a local level (either within partner institutions and/or within the immediate society)?	Addressed within Equity among partners and mutual benefits stemming from partnerships
What are the most cost-effective partnership models? (Is there a form of partnership/collaboration which has made particularly significant contribution to development for a low investment?)	Cost-effectiveness of partnership models

Research question as per Terms of Reference	Final report heading / section
Is there evidence of how inter-institutional international collaboration has been a necessary contributory factor in achieving impact with regard to the SDGs (e.g. evidence of where a desired impact would not have happened without the international partnership)?	Added value of the partnership model
How are universities embedding the sustainability of international partnerships, and intended impact on the SDGs, in their culture and practice?	Higher education and sustainable development: building on the success of international HE partnerships

## 2.2. Conduct of the study

The study was carried out in three phases between March 2021 and July 2021:

- Phase 1 – Inception
- Phase 2 – Fieldwork
- Phase 3 – Analysis and reporting

### 2.2.1. Phase 1 - Inception

In the inception phase, the study team conducted an initial review of literature.

In addition, as part of the inception phase, the consortium conducted seven scoping interviews. These were conducted in a semi-structured format, and the findings were used to further refine the methodology, tailor the field work and data collection as well as feed into the final analysis for this study.

### 2.2.2. Phase 2 - Fieldwork

This phase of the study involved the main data collection programmes.

#### Meta-analysis and review of literature

The meta-analysis and review of literature helped to determine what research has already been conducted about the contribution(s) of international collaboration to the SDGs.

The data and information collected through the literature review were analysed from five main perspectives:

- What evidence is available in the literature on the contribution of international partnerships in tertiary education to the SDGs?
- What are the international partnerships in tertiary education identified and referenced in the literature? (to feed into the mapping task below)
- What are the drivers and challenges in relation to international partnerships and their contribution to the SDGs?
- Are there other sources of evidence referenced in the literature which could be of interest for the study?
- What are the evidence gaps on which our further data collection should focus?
- The literature was, therefore, used in the following ways:
  - To identify additional international higher education partnerships for the mapping
  - To identify additional relevant stakeholders to be approached for consultation
  - To enhance and/or illustrate findings emerging from the analysis of the other collected data.

### Mapping of the partnerships

In this task, we, by means of desk research, mapped the landscape of international higher education partnerships. The main aim of the mapping was to better understand the current state of play; how the existing partnerships (but also the recently finished ones) operate in terms of their activities (e.g. curricular reform, teacher training, joint study programmes; joint research projects etc.), their governance models and the division of responsibility among partners; how they contribute to SDGs; indication of success and impact; and other characteristics (e.g. funders, geography, budget, duration etc.).

The mapping exercise did not aim at providing a comprehensive list of all relevant international higher education partnerships globally, because this would not be feasible. Instead, the mapping aimed at capturing the diversity of the partnership landscape and at making sure that partnerships with different attributes are represented in the mapping.

In total, we 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 results are presented in the annex.

### Case studies

We prepared a set of 10 detailed case studies, each showcasing a different international partnership and the approach to how they have contributed to achieving the SDGs.

The case study approach allowed us to dig deeper into the model of operation of each partnership and the mechanisms of achieving its goals. The case studies were also important to put each partnership into the right context in order to better understand the reasons why the effects have occurred.

The list of the case studies is presented in Figure 4.

**Figure 4** - Case studies selected for the study

Title of the partnership	Funder of the partnership / Funding programme
Climate Proof Vietnam	NUFFIC (NL) / Orange Knowledge Programme
Mastercard Foundation Scholars Program	Mastercard Foundation
SIDA-supported research capacity and higher education development programme in Rwanda	SIDA (SE)
Policy and Governance Studies in South: regional Master and PhD Programs	Norad (NO) / NORHED
REPESEA - Assessing and Improving Research Performance at South East Asian Universities	European Commission (EACEA) / Erasmus+ (KA2)
Collaborative PhD programme in economics	SIDA (+ The Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation, NORAD among many others)
Groundwater Futures in Sub-Saharan Africa	NERC (UK), DFID (UK), ESRC (UK) / Unlocking the Potential for Groundwater for the Poor (UPGro)
Developing Pedagogy for 21st Century Skills in Nepal	Finland's Ministry for Foreign Affairs + the Finnish National Agency for Education (EDUFI) / Higher Education Institutions Institutional Cooperation Instrument (HEI ICI)
Prepared for Practice (Pfp)	FCDO/DFID (UK) / SPHEIR
Partnership between the Karolinska Institutet in Sweden and Makerere University in Uganda on the Centre of Excellence for Sustainable Health (CESH)	Both partners fund the partnership

### Additional interviews

We gathered additional qualitative data via interviews with key informants across a variety of stakeholder groups. The interviews had a semi-structured format.

We followed a purposive sampling frame, guided by the findings from the scoping interviews, desk research and case studies and our own knowledge. When selecting the interviewees, we looked for linkages between higher education and the SDGs. The following groups of stakeholders were interviewed:

- Representatives of funders (if they have not been interviewed as part of a case study)

- Representatives of relevant international organisations and associations
- Representatives of those international partnerships who were not selected for a case study
- Academics conducting research in the area of international development aid

Figure 5 presents the number of interviews conducted in each category and a full list of interviewees is appended to this report (the table below also includes the interviews conducted as part of the case studies where more general questions around the contribution of international higher education partnerships were discussed as well).

**Figure 5** - Conducted interviews

Type of stakeholder	Number of interviews conducted
Partnership organisations and stakeholders	16
Funder organisations	11
Academics conducting research in the area of international development aid	5
International organisations	3
<b>TOTAL</b>	<b>35</b>

### 2.2.3. Phase 3 - Analysis and reporting

The third and final stage of the study consisted of analysing the evidence gathered during the various steps. In this task, we brought all the evidence together. During the analysis, a specific emphasis

was placed on identifying the specific linkages between the outcomes of the partnerships and the SDGs and emerging trends and patterns, as well as factors influencing the strength of the contributions to the SDGs. The synthesis was structured according to the research questions.

# 3. Findings



This chapter provides the findings and conclusions which take the form of discussions around, and answers to, the research questions. If there were particular differences observed between the various groups of stakeholders and/or data sources, these are mentioned in the discussion for each of the evaluation questions.

## 3.1. Embeddedness of the Sustainable Development Agenda in the design of the partnerships

### 3.1.1. The United Nations' Sustainable Development Goals



The 17 Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) conceptualised by the United Nations came into being in 2015 as a part of the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development adopted by all UN Member States. The Goals serve as a follow-up to the eight Millennium Development Goals and aim to provide a blueprint for sustainable peace and prosperity and a

call for action through partnerships for all nations for their 15-year period. The 17 Goals are further specified in 169 Targets within them and together aim to bring actions for economic, social and environmental development under the same umbrella.<sup>1</sup>

The SDG themes primarily consider:










- People through the eradication of hunger and protecting all peoples' dignity and equality
- Planet through actions against the climate change and sustainable management of its resources
- Prosperity through technological, social and economic progress in harmony with nature
- Peace manifested in inclusive societies free of fear and violence
- Partnership through their potential to strengthen global solidarity and for mobilising the means required for the attainment of the Goals.

Figure 6 - The overview of the 17 SDGs

SDGs	Summary of the Goals
	<p>The goal calls for the eradication of all extreme poverty and the substantial reduction of poverty among men, women and children. The other targets under the Goal involve nationally specific calls for policy reforms and empowerment to shield the people living in poverty through social protection systems and mobilisation of resources.</p>
	<p>The goal holistically addresses issues around food insecurity calling for changes in agricultural practices, market reforms and support for small-scale food producers. The goal urges for prioritising the most vulnerable in all actions to maintain sustainable food security</p>

SDGs	Summary of the Goals
	<p>The large-scale aim is to reduce maternal, neonatal and under-5 mortality as well as targeting the current epidemics such as AIDS and Malaria. The targets also urge for action to ensure universal accessible well-being and healthcare and reducing harmful factors such as pollution and tobacco</p>
	<p>Ensuring free access to relevant level care and education for all children, and affordable technical, vocational and tertiary education for all adults and relevant employment later. The targets also call for the facilitation of access equally, upscaling the supply of qualified teachers and the eradication of illiteracy among youth and adults as possible</p>
	<p>The goal calls for an end to all forms of discrimination, violence and harmful practices against women and girls, ensuring universal access to reproductive healthcare and participation for equal opportunities leadership</p>
	<p>By 2030 the Goals and its Targets seek universal and equitable access to safe and affordable drinking water, sanitation and hygiene. Recognising the environment's role in this, the Targets also aim for the protection of water ecosystems from pollution through eliminating dumping and halving untreated wastewater and bringing together international partners and local stakeholders in sustainable water management across all levels</p>
	<p>The Goal urges for international cooperation and infrastructural and technological advancements for improved energy efficiency, increasing the role of renewable energy and ensuring universal access to affordable and reliable energy</p>
	<p>The broad Goal seeks sustainable and inclusive economic growth of at least 7 per cent GDP growth per annum per nation. It also calls for actions to orient all productivity towards upskilling people for decent work through education and training and to immediately eradicate modern slavery. Actions supporting cultures and developing nations, such as sustainable tourism industry are also involved</p>

1. The official website available online at: <https://sdgs.un.org/goals>

SDGs		Summary of the Goals
	Industry, innovation and infrastructure	The Goal calls for scientific, technological and social actions to develop reliable and resilient national, regional and international infrastructure. The prioritised points of consideration are small-scale enterprises, developing nations, significantly increased employment and universal access to communications technology
	Reduced inequalities	Particularly through fiscal, regulatory and monitoring means, promote the social, economic and political inclusion of all. The focal point here is the bottom 40% of the world's population which is to be aided through empowering and systematic direction of support
	Sustainable cities and communities	The Goal aims for universal access to safe and affordable housing, basic services and transport as well as participatory and sustainable human settlement while safeguarding cultural and natural heritages
	Responsible consumption and production	The Goal aims to achieve the sustainable management of natural resources and wastes through global collaboration, responsibility of transnational companies, impact-monitoring, awareness-raising and empowerment
	Climate action	The Goal urges for the deployment of national policies, strategies and planning in building climate resilience and mitigation. Moreover, awareness-raising and institutional capacity-building among all peoples is emphasised
	Life below water	The Goal addresses marine and coastal ecosystems and the risks to which they are subjected. Associated challenges include pollution, ocean acidification and destructive fishing practices. Other involved targets look at scientific knowledge and its applications in ocean health, support for small island states and the enhancement of conservation practices
	Life on land	The Goal addresses all life on land, biodiversity and its natural habitats. The risks to be addressed consider poaching and trafficking of protected species, deforestation and desertification and invasive species in ecosystems through mobilisation of resources and integration of biodiversity values into planning, development processes and poverty reduction strategies
	Peace, justice and strong institutions	The aim is to abolish or significantly reduce risk of violence, abuse and exploitation, and target corruption, organised crime and illicit financial and arms flows. These goals are in addition and through the development of accountable and transparent institutions, international participation, freedom of information and the protection of fundamental freedoms
	Partnerships for the goals	The overall objective is to build towards equal and effective cooperation at all levels of societies and institutions. This holistic goal targets financial, technological and capacity-related issues, trade and systemic issues in supporting developing nations and regions, and building towards the previously listed Goals



### 3.1.2. The SDGs and international higher education partnerships

International higher education partnerships have a wide range of objectives, and they are reflected in every stage from design through to impacts.

In this section, we discuss the evidence and the emerging findings around the first research question i.e. To what extent do international higher education partnerships build their contribution to the United Nations' Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) into their objectives and design? The main focus of this section is, therefore, on the following:

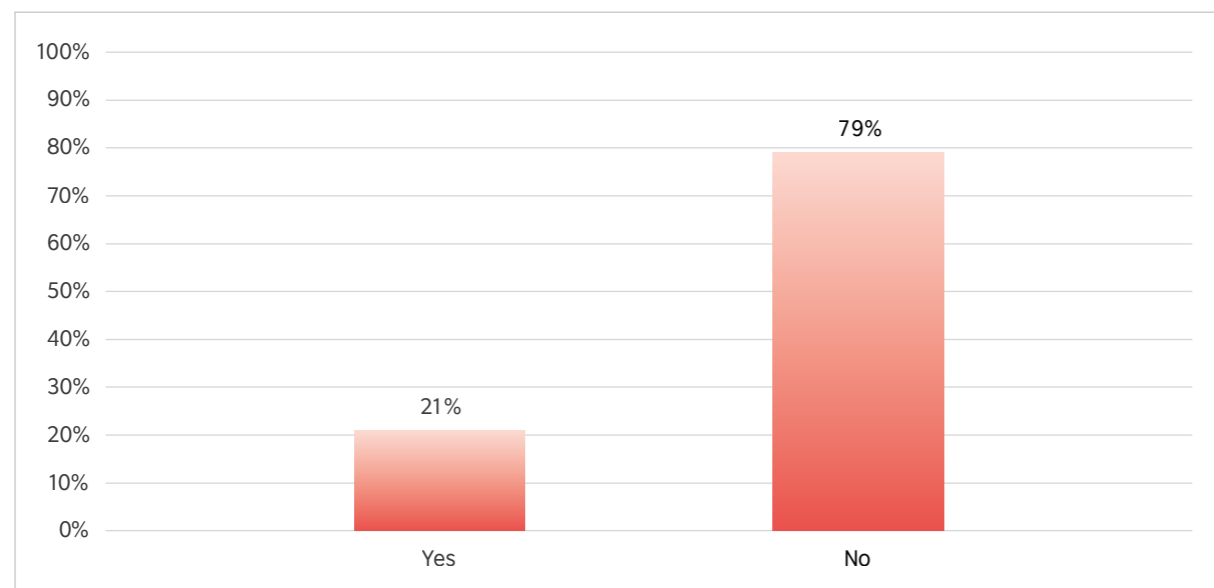
- Do the SDGs play a role when the partnership is being designed?
- Are the SDGs explicitly mentioned among the partnerships' aims and objectives?
- What other roles (if any) do the SDGs play in the day-to-day operations of the partnerships?

### Embedding the SDGs into partnerships' objectives

Whether the SDGs were an explicit part of the partnership design or included as outward contributions was first assessed during the mapping stage of the current study. This information was supported by evidence from the ten in-depth partnership case studies.

Overall, the results show that the SDGs are not commonly included explicitly in the design of higher education partnerships. The mapping exercise showed that only 21% of the partnerships had explicitly named the contribution to the SDGs as an objective. Similarly, two case studies out of ten indicated the use of the SDGs in the official planning.

**Figure 7** - Is contribution to the SDGs explicitly mentioned as a goal / objective of the partnership?



Source: Technopolis and KCL (n=110)

**Figure 8** - Karolinska Institutet and the University of Makerere (funded by SIDA), setting the objectives of the partnership in relation to the contribution to the SDGs

The objectives and aim of the Centre of Excellence in Sustainable Health designed and implemented by a partnership of the University of Makerere (Uganda) and by Karolinska Institutet (Sweden) make explicit reference to the SDGs:

“The aim of the Centre of Excellence for Sustainable Health is to develop capacity and mobilise actions to drive the agenda for sustainable health. From idea to implementation, the Centre is permeated by the 2030 Agenda and the 17 Sustainable Development Goals.”

Source: Technopolis (case study), website of the Centre available online at: <https://cesh.health/>

Instead of deriving directly from the SDGs, the planned objectives tended to originate from specific local challenges or needs, such as national health issues, sustainable production or a call to upscale local research capacity. Not unusually, the partnerships formed on the background of an existing collaboration history between the partners emulating or continuing previous lines of collaboration. Quite often, the objectives were in connection to the funder’s own mission or requirements, or a national strategy.

One explanation of the relatively rare occurrence of the use of the SDGs in deriving the partnerships’ objectives may be that the SDGs were only published in 2015. The SDGs may, therefore, simply be too young a concept to have been taken up at a large scale in the planning of higher education partnerships. In the current study, 45 of the mapped partnerships (out of 110) were created before the introduction of the SDGs, several others are continuations of previous funding periods. The few

partnerships which did mention the SDGs explicitly as a part of their planning are very recent, having started in 2020, and are still ongoing.

**The SDGs as a universal overarching umbrella for the partnerships**

Partnerships tend to be guided by a wide range of strategic frameworks. These could be existing national development strategies, private mission statements or other large visions, such as the Agenda 2063 in Africa.<sup>2</sup>

There are also well articulated links between national and international development strategies and the SDGs.

The Agenda 2063 for example explicitly links its priority areas to the Sustainable Development Goals.<sup>3</sup> At the national level, governments recognise how the SDGs offer a common framework and all countries have agreed to work towards achieving the goals.

2. Agenda 2063: The Africa We Want. <https://au.int/en/agenda2063/overview>  
 3. <https://au.int/agenda2063/sdgs>

Although most of the international higher education partnerships that we have studied do not embed the SDGs directly into their strategic objectives and aims, our research confirms that the SDGs can be easily mapped to the objectives of the partnerships, not least because they tend to map well to the abovementioned national and international frameworks. This transpires from the interviews with the partnership representatives, with the funders, and is one of the emerging findings from the set of case studies.

This has been enabled by the universal character of the SDGs. Given the high-level formulation of each of the 17 SDGs, they are relatively easily applicable in a wide variety of contexts, at any policy level (local, regional, national, international), and in any country. In addition, the SDGs span a very broad range of policy areas. Therefore, they can also be applied across many themes, and, rather than act as a qualifier, the same broadness of topics may act more as a tool for bringing together different partners, or even different partnerships.

Since the SDGs are intrinsically linked to national development goals, and countries have been working on this since 2015, it is highly likely that we will see more explicit representation of the SDGs in national and international funding programmes in the future. There is evidence to this effect from our case studies and interviews and it fits well with the international nature of partnerships to be aligned with an internationally recognised framework.

Furthermore, the focus on easy visualisation (represented by the 17 colourful boxes) means that they are easily recognisable in documents, planning and reporting. Therefore, the SDGs, can be used as a

common point of reference for various policy interventions, and for the assessment of their contribution to wider societal challenges.

**Mapping outcomes of partnerships to the SDGs retrospectively**

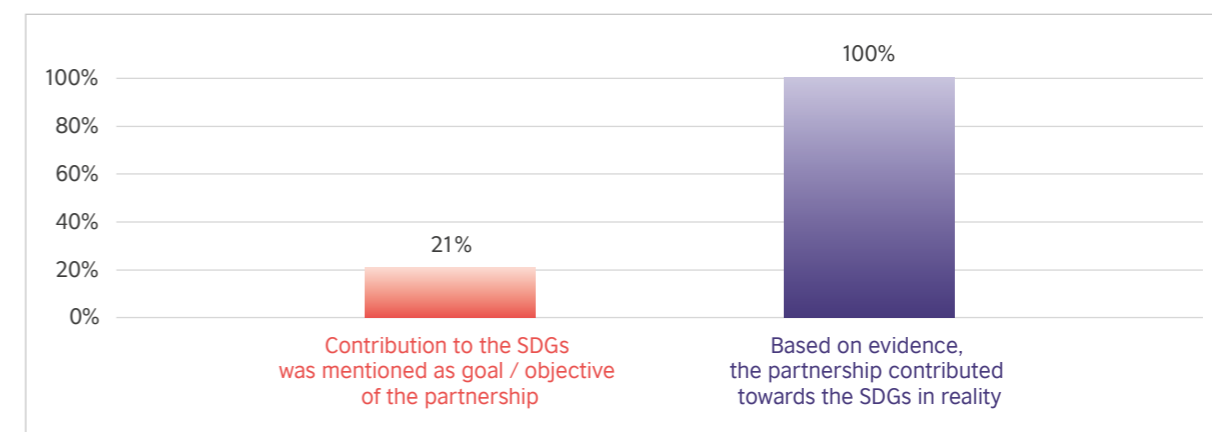
The collected evidence suggests that there are significant differences between how partnerships work with the SDGs as (one of) their explicit goals and what they do, what outcomes they achieve, and how these link to the SDGs in reality. As shown below (see Section 3.3), we were able to identify the specific linkages between the outcomes of the partnerships and the SDGs. This was performed on the mapped partnerships, as well as investigated more in depth in the ten case studies.

In all case studies, the SDGs were found to be at least complementary with the agreed upon priorities and objectives, and in the majority of the case studies, we were able to reference the linkages to the SDGs in hindsight. In these cases, it was often mentioned that the SDGs were indeed not an explicit focus, but that the actual themes and language of the goals were highly aligned with the SDGs.

Figure 9 below provides a comparison between the share of the mapped partnerships which mention the contribution to the SDGs as their objective and the share of those where our further research was able to draw links to the SDGs based on the achieved outcomes.

Some evidence also shows that some overall programmes, individual partners or funders use the SDGs as a guiding framework. Indeed, some funders require contributions to the SDGs for their grants, even if they were not considered in the partnership planning.

**Figure 9** - Embeddedness of the SDGs as a goal vs. contributing to the SDGs in reality



Source: Technopolis

## 3.2. Equity among partners and mutual benefits stemming from partnerships

Partnerships between organisations in the Global North and the Global South are an important model of collaboration and are increasingly common in higher education programmes, both for teaching and research. The discourse on higher education partnerships has focused considerably on the issue of equity. Equity is a foundational pre-requisite for the functioning of partnerships and their ability to deliver the intended outcomes. SDG 17 focuses on “partnerships for the goals” and includes targets for enhancing SDG capacity in developing countries, enhancing policy coherence and strengthening knowledge sharing.

In higher education, the partners from the Global North often come into a partnership better equipped (than partners in the Global South), with a larger capacity to engage, and with a direct relationship to the external funder.

This asymmetry brings challenges for ensuring that partnerships are non-hierarchical, built on mutual goals, understanding, trust and reflect the values and priorities of all partners.

North-South higher education and research partnerships incorporate aspects of both international development cooperation and higher education and research cooperation. This can be seen to cause another set of inherent tensions (alongside the asymmetry of partnership), as higher education and research collaboration tends to be driven by the pursuit of excellence and competitive advantage, whereas in international development, the reasons for collaboration tend to be focused on

capacity building.<sup>4</sup> However the combination of excellence and capacity building are both important components for addressing global challenges, and thus the SDGs, and provide a sound basis for defining joint agendas which can address common problems.

There is no one set of criteria, or definition of an “equitable partnership” but there are many factors which have been explored as part of this study which help to shed light on how best to create and sustain equitable partnerships, as well as providing insights into what equitable and mutually beneficial relationships look like in practice. The majority of factors explored relate to power dynamics among partners and funders.

An important aspect of equity lies in the responsibility/leadership of the partnership, although the nature of the role of lead partner varies significantly and cannot be taken as evidence of equity or non-equity on its own. There are various reasons as to why a partnership is Northern-led, Southern-led or jointly led.

As highlighted, as part of this study, the team mapped 110 higher education partnerships. Of these just over half are Northern-led, around a third are Southern-led and a very small minority have a joint lead, or no lead appointed. The distribution of partner leadership by region shows a different picture. Partnerships with African countries have more Southern-led lead partners than Northern led in the mapped examples, whereas partnerships with Asian countries are predominantly Northern led. Other partnerships, which include both Africa and Asia or indeed other lower- and middle-income countries represent a very small sample in the mapping but are more likely to be Northern led.

Figure 10 - Overview of North-South leadership of partnerships

Leadership	No of mapped partnerships (total)	Partnerships with African countries (only)	Partnerships with Asian countries (only)	Partnerships including Africa and Asia + others
North partner leading	59	22	27	10
South partner leading	36	29	5	2
Joint lead	8	4	2	2
Don't know	1	0	0	1
No lead appointed	6	6	0	0
<b>Total</b>	<b>110</b>	<b>61</b>	<b>34</b>	<b>15</b>

Source: Technopolis and KCL

4. Carbonnier Gilles, Kontinen Tiina, « Institutional Learning in North-South Research Partnerships [\*] », Revue Tiers Monde, 2015/1 (n° 221), p. 149-162. DOI : 10.3917/rm.221.0149. URL : <https://www.cairn.info/revue-tiers-monde-2015-1-page-149.htm>

There are similar proportions between the partnerships whose objectives include the contribution to the SDGs and the partnerships without objectives linked directly to the SDGs within each of the North-led, South-led and joint-led groups of partnerships. In other words, we cannot conclude, for example, that having a South partner in the lead increases the likelihood that the partnership will explicitly reference the SDGs in its objectives, and vice versa.

This section explores several different aspects of equity and mutual benefit, drawing on information from the mapping, stakeholder interviews and case studies. Overall, the general consensus from interviews and case studies is that partnerships tend to be equitable and mutual benefits are derived from the relationship. It is however important to further unpack these aspects to investigate what drives or hinders equitable relationships and how mutual benefits can be achieved. In order to achieve this, the following areas are explored in more detail:

- The choice of partners and ensuring equity
- Funding arrangements and equity
- Equity in the set up of the objectives and delivery plans
- Supporting equity and mutual benefits through governance and procedures
- Defining and understanding mutual benefits

### 3.2.1. The choice of partners and ensuring equity

One issue raised in relation to equity is the choice of partners. There is ample evidence that existing relationships support the engendering of mutual trust and understanding, which are important components of successful and more equitable partnerships.

However, this means that new players who are looking for relationships have a harder time in entering into the arena and thus are often at a disadvantage when it comes to negotiating their share of the funds or having an equal say in the shaping of the partnership. Some interviewees raised the issue of there being a small pool of established higher education institutions in the Global South which tend to be present in multiple partnerships. There are a number of reasons for this, some of the “usual suspects” are there because they have more capacity to manage funds and have a more strategic outward facing vision, and a long history of collaboration.

How to encourage new partnerships is something which funders are discussing actively. Memorandums of Understanding are one way in which trustful and therefore potentially more equitable partnerships can be formulated. Reaching out to new potential partners requires good networks and mechanisms by which discussion and dialogue can take place before application procedures are underway.

This issue of choosing new partners is illustrated by the case study on REPESEA where universities were chosen through existing links but not necessarily working relationships.

Figure 11 - The choice of partners in REPESEA (funded by Erasmus+ Capacity building in Higher Education)

The REPESEA partnership of eleven higher education institutions from Europe and Southeast Asia set out to develop a novel way of assessing research impact as well as transferable skill-teaching modules.

Seeking out the partners for this initiative happened somewhat organically, through pre-existing contacts between the University of Economics in Bratislava, participating Thai Universities and the Universiti Teknologi Malaysia. The Malaysian institutions had an incentive to take part in the new partnership as the country had just introduced a new research performance tool and international grant acquisition was part of the new performance criteria. This situation may help to encourage new partners more easily and give them a particular focus for negotiating the objectives.

A certain degree of challenge was detected among both European and Southeast Asian partners. This was considered to be due to differences in academic and working cultures which, in turn, somewhat hindered mutual understanding. It was felt that some partners were not sufficiently aware of the opportunities in the European-led programme. Moreover, some challenges were identified in the comprehension of the bureaucratic requirements from the ERASMUS+ as a funder; a degree of misunderstanding was detected with submitting a letter of commitment by some partners, and in this process, the Northern partners carried out prevalent support with the adherence to the existing requirements.

Source: Technopolis (case study)

From the specific perspective of Southern HEIs, the choice of Higher Education partners can be challenging. In one interview, a partner organisation indicated choosing a Northern partner because they claimed it provides credibility with funders (even when this is not a funding criteria), meaning that in this instance the relationships may be based on a perceived need to fulfil an unwritten criteria rather than based on an existing relationship or mutual goal. However in the case of the SPHEIR programme, the mid-term evaluation provides evidence from the partnerships that having international partners had actually increased project credibility and influence within partner institutions.<sup>5</sup>

Another important point made in the interviews was in relation to expanding the choice of types of partners to increase equity, to serve a number of different purposes. For example, including National Research Councils or relevant education bodies in the mix is one way to ensure that the partnership goals are well aligned to national priorities and thus position the associated country higher education institutions on a more level playing field with their counterparts in the North. In the case study on a Collaborative PhD Programme in Economics (CPP)

the partnership is overseen by the African Economic Research Consortium (AERC) an international NGO supported by donor governments, private foundations and international organisations. There are also other types of partners, as illustrated in the case study on Prepared for Practice (FCDO) where there is a health partner (KGHP, UK), three Somaliland universities, an international non-governmental organisation (INGO) and a non-profit technology company involved. The roles and responsibilities reflect the distinctive expertise each partner brings.

It is not only the higher education institutions choosing partners, as funders also choose partners for their programmes. In this instance, it may seem to be challenging to have an equitable relationship and mutual benefits between two such different organisational types.

There are two case studies which illustrate direct partnerships between funders and universities. The first is between SIDA and the University of Rwanda, the second case study is on the Mastercard Foundation Scholars program and its partnership with the University of Makerere. Both have long established collaborations.

**Figure 12** - Direct partnership between funders and higher education institutions (SIDA-University of Rwanda and the MCF at Makerere University, Uganda)

SIDA and the University of Rwanda have a long-established relationship (since 2003) supporting capacity building and research (a total budget of SEK334m for 2013-2018). There is a strong relationship, with SIDA having an active presence in Kigali with a programme manager with a broad range of tasks facing both the university and the policy makers.

The Mastercard Foundation Scholars program and its partnership with the University of Makerere represents a significant funding arrangement between a university and a funder (in the case of Makerere around \$20m over 10 years). The relationship is younger than with SIDA and Rwanda (since 2013) but still relatively long lived. Both MCF and Makerere describe the relationship as equitable. MCF is also present in the region.

“The partners are focused on a common agenda and agree to common goals and measurement. The learning element is critical in these types of partnerships.”

Source: Technopolis (case study)

One interview with a funder gave insights into how a new relationship might be set up between themselves and a university directly. In this instance, the funder has a long-established process for choosing potential new partners. Where new collaborations are to be established, the process involves visiting a country on a number of occasions

in order to choose the right institution. The reasons for this, in their view, are in order to concentrate support and maximise impact. It highlights the importance of having an agenda and establishing a relationship before entering into a partnership, but at the same time risks inequalities in agenda setting between the organisations.

5. <https://www.spheir.org.uk/about/spheir-mid-term-evaluation-report>, IPE Tripleline, Technopolis, University of Bedfordshire, 2020

### 3.2.2. Funding arrangements and equity

It is not possible to establish the budgetary allocations within partnerships as part of this study,

however equity and mutual benefits are intrinsically linked to the funding available and who administers the funds.

“The person who has the money has a bigger say. ... The agenda might be set I suspect by the party with the money.”

Source: Interview, partner beneficiary

Many of the funding agencies have understandably stringent requirements on their funds which makes taking a lead financial role challenging, which may favour the Northern partners as the lead, at least for grant management. This may be one of the reasons

that Northern led partners continue to dominate the landscape. There is also one example from the case studies where a programme is considering reverting back to a Northern-led model (NORHED programme, see Figure 13).

**Figure 13** - From Southern-led funding to Northern-led (NORHED)

In the case of the NORHED programme in Norway, the last rounds of programming have been defined by Southern led partnerships. In the NORHED case study, the lead for grant management, coordination and reporting is taken by Tribhuvan University. This was seen as an important step towards the achievement of the programme objectives. However, NORAD (the funding agency) has faced a number of challenges and as a result has revisited the model and grant management responsibilities will shift back to the Norwegian partners for the next stage of the programme. This ongoing need for administrative capacity building remains a stumbling block for many higher education institutions to take the lead in a project.

Source: Technopolis (case study)

In a number of the Northern-led partners there are examples provided from the interviews where the Northern partners provide more funding than initially foreseen in order to ensure that Southern partners can take more of a role in knowledge sharing activities. This is done through mechanism such as paying for their own travel and providing additional travel and accommodation to Southern-led universities.

Other types of in-kind contributions are also made from both Northern and Southern partners. In the case study on the SPHEIR's Prepared for Practice partnership (PFP), there are additional in-kind contributions from the King's Global Health Partnership. There is more that can be done to provide higher education institutions in the Global South with the capacity to lead partnerships, where relevant. One example of where this type of

administrative capacity building is being achieved is in the current HEP SSA programme, run by the Royal Academy of Engineering in the UK. The projects funded under the programme have a “hub and spoke model” with hub universities attracting the grant management role and spoke universities being involved in some activities only. As the programme has progressed a number of the spoke universities have put in applications to become hub universities in the future, thus increasing the pool of institutions with the capacity to administer the grants.

Increasing the administrative capacity of all higher education institutions, either through partnership activities (training) or via additional support activities provided by funders is one way of ensuring that more equitable decisions can be made with regard to who takes on the partnership lead.

**Figure 14** - Supporting financial management capacity building (HEI ICI)

The case study on the Higher Education Institutions – Institutional Cooperation Instrument (HEI ICI) funded project highlights the long term the intention of the programme to upskill the Southern partner, Tribhuvan University (TU) to be able to manage financial administration of international collaborative projects. Currently there are a number of hurdles to overcome before funds could be transferred through TU. To ensure that lasting institutional capacity is being built, and that the financial reporting adheres to the requirements of the Finnish funders, the partners arranged financial compliance workshops for Nepalese staff and adopted the MFA Finland's Anti-Corruption Handbook for their procedures.

Source: Technopolis (case study)

### 3.2.3. Equity in the set-up of the objectives and delivery models

There are changes being seen in the way in which North-South partnership in education and research are being designed and delivered which positively impact on equity and benefits. There is a growing

emphasis on the need for “participatory, partnership-based approaches that prioritise the values and concerns of Southern stakeholders and the sustainability and local ownership of development efforts”.<sup>6</sup> This is evident in the case studies and interviews undertaken as part of this study.

“There is a particular emphasis on co-creation and participatory decision making and there is no man with a big stick approach. That would not work, and it is ok to be the person who knows the rules and regulations, but it is not ok to direct the others as a sole decision maker.”

Source: Interview, partner organisation

Funders also require evidence of equity in the proposals for projects in some instances. In the case study on HEI-ICI, the implementation plan was set out during the proposal phase during a week-long visit of the Nepalese colleagues in Finland. This collaborative effort was seen at the time as a new approach which provided the partners from the developing countries an equal say in the design of the project. The GroFutures partnership case study, which is Southern-led with involvement from the UK is wholly developed to address a specific challenge

affecting the Sub Saharan Africa stakeholders, and in the case of Tanzania was also informed by the Ministry for Water and Irrigation. The existence of in country and out of country Principal Investigators as part of the delivery model ensured a level of equity between Global North and South partners.

In the case study on PfP (SPHEIR programme), the delivery model highlights how all of the partners are involved across the activities, taking into account their respective expertise.

**Figure 15** - Delivery model and the involvement of the partners (Prepared for Practice; funded by FCDO/DFID)

Prepared for Practice is led by King's Global Health Partnerships (KGHP) in partnership with Tropical Health Education Trust (THET), MedicineAfrica (MA), Amoud University (AU), University of Hargeisa (UoH), and Edna Adan University (EAU). The project built on an existing partnership between the six organisations.

KGHP has three main responsibilities: managing the grant; leading the Partnership in the delivery of the project outcomes; and co-leading the delivery of the undergraduate and institutional workstreams with Somaliland Universities. THET has three main roles on the project: to lead the policy workstream; provide in-country coordination support; and lead programme operations in Somaliland. MedicineAfrica manage the projects' educational learning platform and the University of Hargeisa, Amoud University and Edna Adan University are the three main implementation sites of the project. They co-lead the delivery of the undergraduate and faculty workstreams at their universities and support the delivery of the policy and regulation workstream. The following matrix structure shows the involvement of partners in the workstreams.

Workstream	KGHP	THET	MA	UOH	EAU	AU
Undergraduate	Lead	Support	Support	Co-lead	Co-lead	Co-lead
Institutional	Lead	Support	Support	Co-lead	Co-lead	Co-lead
Policy and regulation	Support	Lead	N/A	Support	Support	Support

Source: Technopolis (case study)



Even though in the case of PfP, this involvement in workstreams is spread across the partnership, the mid-term evaluation of SPHEIR brings evidence that as a consequence of Covid-19, there was a shift in the balance of power within the partners (indicating it was not necessarily equitable). The partnership observed that Covid-19 ‘moved educational technology centre stage and changed the power relationship in the partnership to one that is more equal’.<sup>7</sup>

However there are still concerns, which are noted in the interviews, in particular asymmetries in agenda setting. In one interview with a funder, equity was noted as a problem which will always be there if money comes from the Global North and the capacity remains weak in Southern countries to set the agenda. It was recognised by the funder that if the Northern HEI sets up a project which it thinks is interesting for a country but without due discussion or an existing partner, it generally fails. The need for funders to support capacity building pre application is still vital and can form part of the process of creating new relationships and well as providing fundamental training for objective setting, management and proposal writing. In another interview with a funder, formulation visits have been added into the portfolio of activities. These need to take place in Southern countries, particularly when this is linked to a local need or problem and be driven by these types of concerns rather than a research publication. Another identified need from the funders is to support partnerships with setting out their own rules and regulations (the organisation of advisory committees for example- see below on governance structures). A particular issue raised is

that in some cultures, raising awareness of your own needs is not always comfortable to achieve. In one interview with a partner the problem of hierarchical systems was raised, whereby it was considered difficult culturally to say what you really need or want as it is not considered the norm to do so. This introduces a need for cultural sensitivity and acumen from other partners and funders to ensure that equity can be achieved, and also an openness to learning from all involved. As already highlighted above in relation to the choice of partners in the case study on REPESEA, the cultural challenges impeded understanding at times.

Another related issue which is brought into the discourse by the funders interviewed, and also relates to equity is decolonisation. This is seen as important in international development but is equally important in higher education and relates to the power dynamics. Funders understand the need to support more equitable partnerships and the decolonisation conversation brings a new dimension to reflect on in terms of their practices. There is more to do on this issue but funders signal being open to feedback, discussion and debate from both the North and the South.

At the same time, there is evidence to suggest that funders can also still impose potentially misguided criteria on partnerships. For example, asking for the inclusion of additional partners to fulfil a criteria where there is no ongoing relationship, thus potentially exacerbating equity. There is no simple solution to this, but taking stock of the need for pre-proposal stage work and capacity building is an important part of the answer.

6. Idersey, H.M., Abera, M., Mzinganjira, A., Abebe, S. and S. Demissie (2019) The University of Gondar, Queen's University and Mastercard Foundation Scholars Program: A partnership for disability-inclusive higher education in Ethiopia In Gateways: International Journal of Community Research and Engagement, Vol. 12, No. 2.

7. <https://www.spheir.org.uk/about/spheir-mid-term-evaluation-report>, IPE Tripleline, Technopolis, University of Bedfordshire, 2020



### 3.2.4. Supporting equity and mutual benefits through governance and procedures

The governance set up and procedures have a clear role in supporting equity and mutual benefit within partnerships. These mechanisms which support equity include the use of joint steering, management and advisory boards for example.

In one interview with a partnership beneficiary, in order to encourage a more equitable governance

and management structure, the University Advisory Boards set up a joint agenda which had to reflect the government agenda of the Southern Country. The Advisory Boards alongside a committee for the partnership discuss the priorities together and equity is explicitly part of the agenda.

In the case studies, there is ample evidence of joint governance and management even when the lead is with the Northern partner. This is mostly achieved through equal representation in the governing and management structures.

**Figure 16** - Examples of joint governance and management structures from the case studies

The REPESEA partnership has a steering group consisted of one representative from each of the eleven partaking institutions with the University of Economics in Bratislava as the lead partner. The steering group was the main decision-making body.

In the case study on HEI-ICI between JAMK in Finland and Universities in Nepal, although JAMK is the coordinator of the project, and has a dedicated Project Manager, there is a particular emphasis put on co-creation and participatory decision making among the partners. There is a Project Board established which is in charge of the overall management of the project. The Project Board is chaired by the Vice Chancellor of NOU. All other partners are represented in the Board.

PfP is governed by a Strategic Management Board which comprises one senior representative from each of the six partner organisations. As the grant holder, KGHP chair and administer the SMB, but voting rights are such that decision-making is weighted in Somaliland, with four representatives from Somaliland (THET Somaliland and the three Somaliland universities) and two representatives from the UK (KGHP and MA).

In the case of CPP, a case study on a Southern led partnership, the AERC, the international non-governmental organisation which leads the partnership has a Memorandum of Understanding with the departments/schools of economics at each of the 8 partnering universities in 6 countries. The Heads of Department of the partnering universities are members of the AERC Academic Advisory Board, which is responsible for the management of all academic aspects of the programmes.

Source: Technopolis, KCL

Funders play a role in ensuring ownership throughout the governance and management of a partnership. Although there is still often only a direct line of oversight from the funder to the lead partner, funders indicate in interview that they perform their own checks on equity and if there are signs this is not going to plan then steps can be taken. For example, requesting other partners to join annual reporting meetings, encourage joint report writing or adding sections to reporting templates which

need to be filled in by other partners. In the case study on HEI-ICI, ensuring equity is both a requirement of the programme as well as capturing evidence on the shared understanding of the way of working together by the partners engaged.

Covid-19 can be said to have increase equity by facilitating more open access to meetings which means that more partners can join more regularly and remain engaged. However, the view from Southern partners can still remain the opposite.

"We feel very far away from having the full information set compared to our Northern partners. Quite often our funders know our partners in the North, they speak with them, but they do not know us in the South."

Source: Interview, academic

### 3.2.5. Defining and understanding mutual benefits

Knowledge is an important benefit derived from partnership and this is evident across partnerships. However, the majority of impacts or benefits articulated in the mapping and the case studies are for the Southern universities, particularly for the education-led partnerships. The benefits for the Northern partners are not so well defined, although they are possible to derive from the interviews and publications. One particular benefit is funding. In the Global North, there are a large number of countries where competitive funding forms an increasingly important income stream and therefore significant resource and expertise is made available within the institutions to prepare proposals for grants, including international development projects. However, there are many more benefits over and above being a source of funding. In the UK, the results of a UUKi survey of UK Institutions on the impact of ODA (official development assistance) funded programmes highlighted benefits such as changes to institutional strategies, more holistic responses to challenge-led themes, international reputation, changes in the way research is conducted and greater awareness of developing countries challenges.<sup>8</sup> These benefits can be perceived as mutual, even if less well articulated by beneficiaries within partnerships.

The case study on Climate Proof Vietnam is one where mutual benefits are more clearly articulated. In this partnership between TU Delft and HUNRE all parties acknowledged the added value of the continued international partnership in terms of trust, mutual understanding, knowledge exchange, capacity building and continuous curriculum and skills improvement. Exchange and mobility was a key component of the project (for education and research).

There are also partners where the mutual benefits have a number of levels of effect. For example, the King's Global Health Partnerships is an initiative of King's College London and works with health facilities, academic institutions and governments to strengthen health systems and improve the quality of care in four countries: Somaliland, Sierra Leone, the Democratic Republic of Congo and Zambia. Using a long-term partnership and volunteering model, the organisation connects UK and Africa health professionals, facilitates skills and knowledge exchange, and mutual learning. This contributes to building a stronger health workforce and improved quality of healthcare both internationally and in the UK.

Focusing in more detail at the specific benefits for Southern partners, the education-related partnerships tend to be introducing specific changes such as new curricula, pedagogy or qualifications within the Southern partners. These are mostly activities which are focused on the Southern countries and where the Northern partners contribute in terms of expertise.

Within education related partnerships it is important to ensure that the benefits derived for the Southern partners are culturally fit for purpose. This is evident in the case study on HEI-ICI where for the new Master's programme the partnership benefited from the significant expertise the Finnish partners have in the field of teacher training and online and distance education. Such collaborative work required the partners to think similarly about the new curricula, in spite of the significant cultural differences between Finland and Nepal.

The benefits in the research related projects are more at risk of unequal benefits in impact.<sup>9</sup> This is where Northern partners appear to derive much clearer benefits in terms of access to data for publication and the development of long standing relationships with institutions who are carrying out research which is of interest to the Northern partner.

For Southern partners, the benefits often extend beyond the partnerships, into the community. Although these are not mutual benefits, this phenomenon is not something which is necessarily seen for Northern partners.<sup>10</sup> For example in the case study on developing Pedagogy for 21st Century Skills in Nepal, one of the participating institutions (NOU) has campuses in each of the seven Nepalese regions which facilitates outreach to the remote areas. While it would be difficult to get direct access to schools in the small remote villages, the regional capitals have education campuses that provide support in disseminating the training and delivering the content locally. The project has already secured the support of the seven regional educational policy making body as a first step towards the implementation in the coming years. Another example is Climate Proof Vietnam where the local community is engaged through the 'citizen science' approach in research/data collection campaigns. For every project, researchers connect to the local community to gather data around the challenges and the resources available. This strengthens the links between ministries, universities and the community, producing information is important to all parties and the partnership's objectives as well.

8. UUKi (2020) Impact of ODA funding

9. Carbonnier G and Kontinen T (2014). North-South Research Partnership: Academia Meets Development?, EADI Policy Paper Series, Bonn. [www.eadi.org/typo3/fileadmin/Documents/Publications/EADI\\_Policy\\_Paper/EADI\\_policy\\_paper\\_Carbonnier\\_Kontinen\\_FINAL.pdf](http://www.eadi.org/typo3/fileadmin/Documents/Publications/EADI_Policy_Paper/EADI_policy_paper_Carbonnier_Kontinen_FINAL.pdf) Accessed June 2021

10. One example where there are additional effects into the community is in the case of King's College London who take a whole university approach to refugees and its partnerships also add value to their strategic focus, which extends into the community

However, the fact that the benefits for the wider community are more likely to be observed in the Global South than in the Global North could also be partially explained by a lower awareness and exploration of the benefits in the Global North (and for Northern partners) stemming from international higher education partnerships.

### 3.3. Contribution of international higher education partnerships to the SDGs

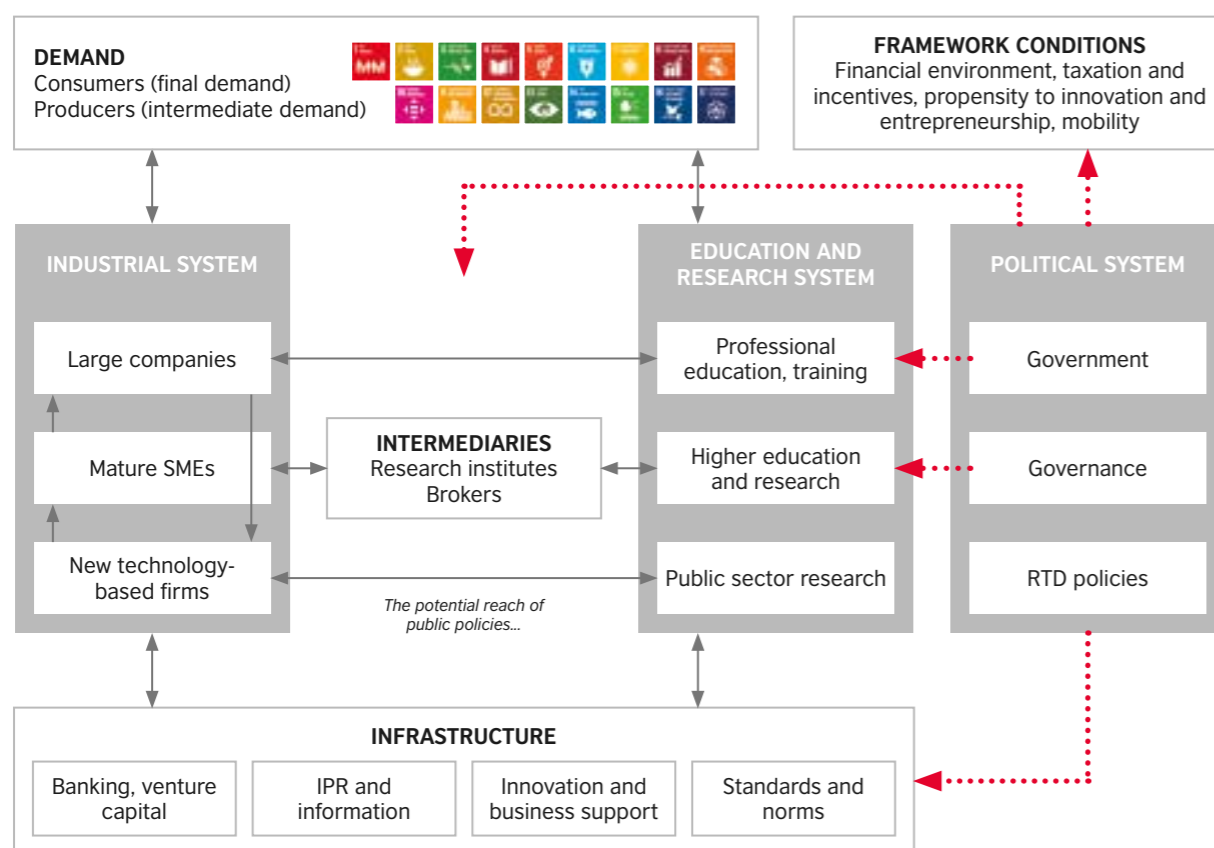
#### 3.3.1. Introduction

The role of higher education in the national development is pivotal and crucial. In our scoping report, we discussed some of the literature evidencing this role.<sup>11</sup> The contribution of higher education takes several forms. Higher education provides training for future experts and leaders who

are in high demand when it comes to addressing local and global challenges. Higher education institutions are essential for the whole education system by training teachers, conducting research and providing guidance in the area of school education. Higher education also supplies policy-makers with evidence, policy advice and develop innovative solutions for tackling wider societal challenges. As such, higher education is key in addressing the sustainable growth and development agenda, which is often framed with the 17 UN's Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs).<sup>12</sup>

Figure 17 shows the position of higher education (teaching and research) in national innovation ecosystems. The 17 SDGs, representing wide societal challenges are part of the societal demand for research and innovation which, along with other players in the ecosystem (government, industry etc.), higher education directly addresses.

Figure 17 - National Innovation Systems Heuristic



Source: Adapted from Kuhlmann, S., & E. Arnold (2001) RCN in the Norwegian Research and Innovation System, Background Report No 12 in the Evaluation of the Research Council of Norway. Oslo: Royal Norwegian Ministry of Education, Research and Church Affairs, prepared by Technopolis.

11. For example: Hanushek, E., and Woessmann, L (2008) The Role of Cognitive Skills in Economic Development In Journal of Economic Literature 46 (3); Bloom, D., Canning, D. and Chan, K. (2006) Higher Education and Economic Development in Africa; Oketch, M., McCowan, T. and Schendel, R. (2014) The Impact of Tertiary Education on Development; and Howell, C., Unterhalter, E. and M. Oketch (2020) The role of tertiary education in development: A rigorous review of the evidence

12. More information available here: <https://sdgs.un.org/goals>

In this section / and the following section(s), we present the synthesis of the evidence collected around the contribution of international higher education partnerships to the SDGs. More specifically, we discuss the following:

- The links between activities, outputs and outcomes of international higher education partnerships and the SDGs
- The factors which facilitate or hinder the contribution of international higher education partnerships to the SDGs and the challenges faced
- The extent to which various partnership models influence the degree of contribution to the SDGs
- The ways the contribution of international higher education partnerships to the SDGs is and could be monitored and measured

The findings are based on the evidence gathered via the key informant interviews, case studies, desk research and mapping and review of literature.

In Section 3.1, we discussed the embeddedness of the SDG in the design of the partnerships and how

the SDGs act as an overarching framework guiding partnerships, albeit often without the partnerships explicitly pursuing the SDGs as objectives in their intervention logics.

In reality, however, linkages between the SDGs and international higher education partnerships could be found in practically all cases, either retrospectively (by looking at the outcomes that the partnerships delivered) or linking the expected outcomes with the SDGs, without the need to modify the original objectives of the partnerships.

In this section, we present the synthesis of the evidence on the mechanisms through which the individual partnerships address the SDGs. As explained, these links are often tacit and implicit, regardless of whether we speak about partnerships focusing on teaching and learning or about partnerships focusing on research, or combination of both. Therefore, it was one of the aims of our study to uncover them, at least for those partnerships which we studied more in depth. Figure 18 provides more detail on the method which we used for the identification of these mechanisms.

Figure 18 - Method for identifying the mechanisms through which international higher education partnerships contribute to the SDGs.

In order to arrive to a framework linking the partnerships' outcomes with the SDGs, we built on the scoping report, in which we presented a matrix containing a wide range of examples of outcomes of interventions in higher education (for each of the traditional higher education missions) and how they are relevant for the SDGs.

The links between the partnerships and the SDGs were then uncovered in two ways:

- We mapped 110 different partnerships against a common set of indicators and variables. By studying the activities, outputs and outcomes of each of these partnerships, we assigned the relevant SDG(s) to which they contribute. A summary report from the mapping is appended to this report
- We prepared 10 in-depth case studies, each studying very closely one selected international higher education partnership. This combined both desk research and data collection via interviews with individuals involved in the partnerships (typically the funder and representatives of the partner organisations). As part of the case studies, we prepared a detailed overview of how the outcomes of each partnership link to the SDGs and also to the sub-SDG targets (which are generally more operational than the 17 high-level SDGs. This was then validated and further elaborated upon in interviews with the partnership representatives. The full case studies are appended to this report.

Source: Technopolis, KCL

### 3.3.2. Activities, outputs and outcomes of international HE partnerships and the SDGs

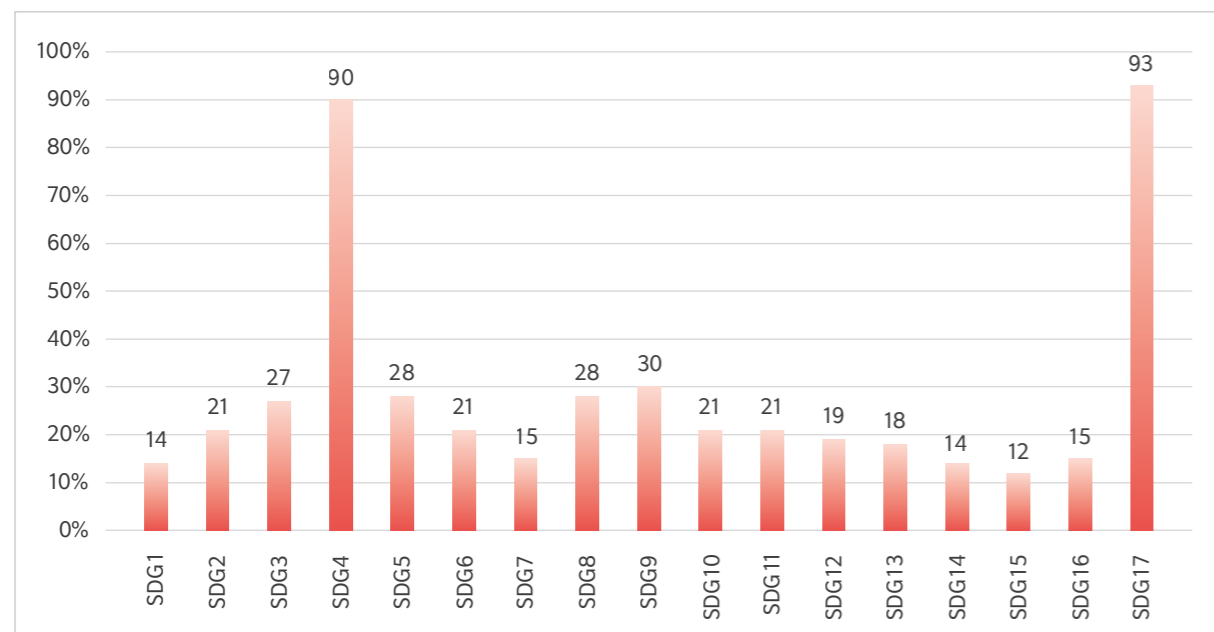
Overall, our research shows that international higher education partnerships contribute very significantly to the UN's Sustainable Development Agenda and its 17 SDGs.

Among the 110 partnerships that we mapped and analysed, there is a good diversity of the SDGs, and there are observable links to all 17 SDGs. This provides evidence that international higher education partnerships are relevant for all SDGs, although SDG4 (quality education) and SDG17 (partnerships for the goals) come out more strongly

than others. This could be explained by the fact that we were mapping only those international partnerships which included at least one higher education institution in a partner role.

There are eight other SDGs which are addressed by more than 20 of the mapped partnerships (SDG2, SDG3, SDG5, SDG6, SDG8, SDG9, SDG10, SDG11).<sup>13</sup> Figure 19 shows the number of instances where the team identified a link to the relevant SDG. This means that the total does not add up to the total of mapped partnerships. Furthermore, the figure does not reflect the "quality" of contributions to the SDGs, because these are very difficult to quantify. However, they are studied in depth in the ten case studies.

**Figure 19** - SDGs addressed among the mapped partnerships (number of partnerships where a link to the relevant SDG was identified)



Source: Technopolis and KCL; note: n=110; one partnership can contribute to multiple SDGs, therefore the sum do not add up to 110.





Although each partnership designs and implements their own activities, resulting in distinct outputs and outcomes, there are trends observable across the mapped portfolio of international higher education

partnerships. The following table provides a summary of outcomes through which the mapped partnerships contribute to the SDGs.

13. The set of case studies provides a more detailed insight into the specific outcomes and mechanisms through which the partnerships contribute to the SDGs.

**Figure 20** - Overview of specific outcomes through which the partnerships contribute to the SDGs (based on the mapping of partnerships)

SDGs		How partnerships contribute
	No poverty	Enabling access to education for those who do not have the sufficient resources for it.
	Zero hunger	Food insecurity is addressed through research on agri-food, nutrition and sustainable consumption.
	Good health and well-being	The partnerships generally target specific health challenges relevant to their partner countries, such as human papilloma virus, tuberculosis and malaria. Innovative capacity-building in research and practise as well as scaling up access to services are common goals. Specific activities and outputs include an international information sharing platform, awareness-raising campaign and rapid field tests for tuberculosis.
	Quality education	An overwhelming majority of the mapped partnerships include activities relevant to higher education (therefore to SDG4). Common specific themes include developing curriculum and PhD training as well as improving facilities in partner universities. Transforming higher education so that it becomes more accessible is also a common goal in the HEI-focused innovations. Another overarching theme has been aligning the academic goals to address the issues of local communities. Provision of scholarships to student and support for academic and student mobility can also be included here as another way how international higher education partnerships contribute to the SDG4.
	Gender equality	The ways in which the mapped projects contribute to the SDG5 is largely two-fold. Most of the partnerships feature efforts to enhance women's' position in academia by enabling more women to access higher education (often in STEM disciplines) and gender responsive pedagogy. The other initiatives focus on issues such as feminine health care and sexual violence in target communities.
	Clean water and sanitation	Although this is not a major focus of international higher education partnerships studies, those identified aim for example at dam building, ecosystem management and the development of sustainable and equitable water use.
	Affordable and clean energy	The partnerships contributing to the SDG7 seek to integrate renewable energy themes in education, practices and infrastructures and training engineering lecturers in higher education institutions.
	Decent work and economic growth	Relevant partnerships feature HEI-industry collaboration and learning transferable skills for industry at higher education institutions. Other partnerships target private sector through working conditions and equal pay as well as economic policies.

SDGs	How partnerships contribute	
	Industry, innovation and infrastructure	The partnerships contributing to the SDG9 generally aim to positively affect the local industry and capacities. This tends to happen through innovation in production, logistics, and locally relevant agricultural solutions.
	Reduced inequalities	Gender equality in academia and outside academia is addressed among the partnerships (see SDG5). In addition, the partnerships aim at making higher education and labour markets more accessible through financial support and capacity building. Moreover, some partnerships address the inequality of the labour markets as a whole through research.
	Sustainable cities and communities	The partnerships focus on integrating socially impactful transferable skills, heightened community outreach and collaboration at HEIs producing solutions to local challenges, such as the production of heritage products.
	Responsible consumption and production	The responsible consumption and production goal is contributed to mainly through innovations in agricultural and environmental projects and by following established sustainable production principles.
	Climate action	The relevant partnerships focus largely on research and policies around issues impacting climate change. These involve developing pathways to sustainable greenhouse gas emissions, researching atmospheric methane and contributing to the development of climate change policies.
	Life below water	Partnerships' outcomes contributing to life below water consist mostly of research and more indirect action, such as strengthening HEI networks on environment and sustainability.
	Life on land	The relatively least addressed goal in the mapped portfolio of partnerships is contributed to in a few research initiatives (e.g. life sciences approach on ecosystems among other activities). Overall, we saw few direct activities addressing life on land.

Source: Technopolis

In our research, we observed two different avenues through which the partnerships' outcomes are translated into the contribution to the SDGs:

- **Partnerships as contributors to the knowledge base.** Partnerships conduct research activities resulting in improved knowledge about the relevant societal and/or natural issues, which is contextualised to the best benefit of the local community, region or country. Very often, practicable solutions complement the results of the research. However, the partners are not those implementing the results and scaling them up. Scale up and implementation generally has to be done by the government or local authority (although these often bring in universities, NGOs and/or private sector to cooperate). The contribution to the SDGs in these cases, is,

therefore, indirect, as the results of the partnerships, on their own, will not, most likely, improve the individual SDG monitoring indicators. This, however, does not mean that this contribution is less important. On the contrary, such research is necessary in order to prepare solutions or policy briefs where the implementation and scale up are feasible. For the partnership to achieve the maximum impact, it is important that they involve the actors, who will later be in charge of the implementation, as soon as possible. Even if they are not involved as full partners, they should be regularly consulted and provide feedback. The Groundwater Futures in Sub-Saharan Africa (GroFutures) partnership is a good example of this model. (Figure 21)

Figure 21 - Results of the GroFutures partnership (funded by NERC, ESRC and FCDO/DFID)

The GroFutures partnership contributed significantly to the knowledge and evidence base surrounding groundwater use and recharge in Sub-Saharan Africa. This will lead to enhanced groundwater management and usage that will benefit the poor and ensure environmental sustainability. The partnership put scientific knowledge in the hands of those who need it such as governmental water and irrigation departments, water users, community organisations and high-level policy makers and power holders.

However, as this was a research partnership rather than for implementation of development activities, it cannot be said that the work directly contributed to targets set under the SDGs. The partnership saw their role as one of capacity strengthening and developing insights that will inform new development pathways, to be developed and implemented by the countries in question. This is partly because of a lack of research funding in countries which are most affected by climate change and there is a resulting obligation for international partnerships to fund and co-develop this work. Therefore, it is not the role of an international partner, or of research for that matter, to directly contribute to the SDGs but rather to inform and strengthen the capacities of those for whom the work matters most, so that they may work towards the SDGs.

Source: Technopolis, KCL (case study)

- **Partnerships as implementors of new knowledge.** These partnerships conduct research in order to enrich the knowledge base, but they also implement their results in practice. Partnerships improving higher education curriculum, delivering teacher training, improving research skills, performing institutional changes/reforms etc. are good examples. In some cases, the contribution of such partnerships to the SDGs is direct (e.g. institutional changes/reforms can directly lead to improved gender equality (SDG5) in access to and participation in education). In other cases, the contribution is less direct (e.g. improved curricula of study programmes in engineering leads to graduates being more relevant in the labour market, which then in turn supports economic growth (SDG8) through better performing SMEs). Many partnerships combine components of both models, depending on the strands of their activities.

Figure 22 - Results of the REPESEA partnership (funded by the European Commission)

The objective of the Assessing and developing the Research Performance of South-East Asian Universities (REPESEA) partnership was to develop a novel way of assessing research impact that is sensitive to the needs of the environment and communities as well as developing transferable skill-teaching modules. The System of the Assessment of the Impact and Quality of Research was designed for the use of researchers, administrators, and policy makers alike. The second major aspect of REPESEA was research skills-building delivered in the thematic modules across all partner universities. The modules were piloted and adopted by the partnering higher education institutions.

Source: Technopolis, KCL (case study)

### 3.3.3. Interlinkages between the SDGs

The SDGs reflect, in their definition, the most important global challenges. Wider societal challenges almost always require multi-disciplinary approaches, i.e. tackling them effectively means that multiple SDGs have to be addressed at the same time. In other words, focusing on the contribution to one SDG only will not result in a considerable contribution, unless all the other interconnected SDGs are addressed as well. For example, a considerable contribution to SDG4 (quality education) cannot generally be achieved without addressing SDG5 (gender equality) and SDG10 (reduce inequalities) as well. Similarly, SDG6 (water

and sanitation) cannot be addressed without simultaneously tackling SDG12 (sustainable consumption and production) etc. This also means that the contribution of collaborative partnerships in higher education often goes well beyond SDG4 (quality education), even in cases where it is an objective of these partnerships to improve the quality of higher education (e.g. through curriculum development). This is because such improvements always focus on specific study programmes in specific disciplines (e.g. marine biology, medicine), which then links with the relevant SDGs (e.g. SDG14, SDG3).

“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.”

Source: Interview with the UNESCO office in India

International higher education partnerships, due to the fact that they bring together different actors, from different sectors and often from different scientific disciplines, and that they concentrate resources, are better equipped to address the wider societal issues than single organisations acting on their own.

In order to further evidence the close internal links across the SDGs, we reviewed all outcomes of the partnerships studied in depth in our case studies, we clustered the outcomes and indicated the links to the respective SDGs, which was then plotted on a Sankey diagram (Figure 23). It is evident that most of the partnerships' outcomes relate to several SDGs and, in turn, practically all SDGs are addressed

through multiple results stemming from the partnerships.

Some links are stronger (i.e. observed in more specific partnership cases) than others, such as the link between the increased networking and internationalisation and the SDG17 (partnerships for the goals) and improved infrastructure and processes at higher education institutions and the SDG4 (quality education). It is important to add, however, that this analysis was conducted on a purposive sample of the ten partnerships only (in-depth case studies), in order to illustrate the importance of internal links between the SDGs, so the strength of the links cannot be seen as representative of all partnerships globally.

Figure 23 - Interlinkages between partnerships outcomes and the SDGs (for the ten case studies in focus)

Cf. pages 42 and 43

### 3.3.4. Partnership models and contribution to the SDGs

International higher education partnerships come in a wide variety of models and there are significant differences in the way they are set up, funded, managed and governed.

In the scoping report, we defined characteristic attributes of partnership models:

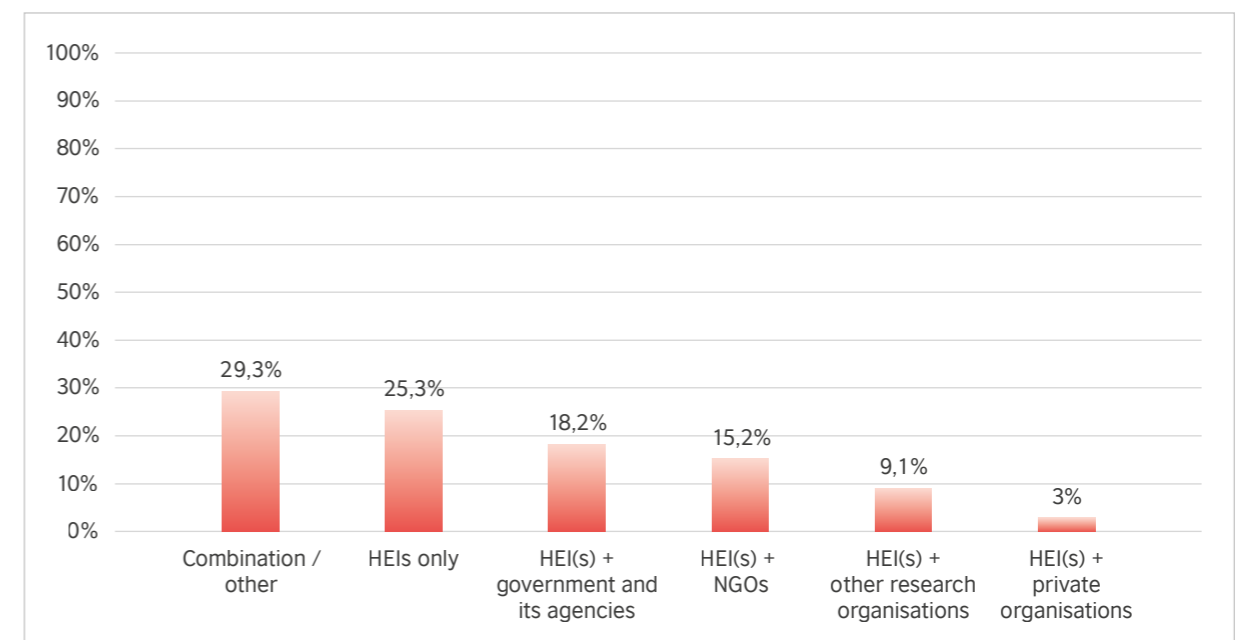
- **Types of organisations involved.** Is the partnership composed of higher education institutions only? What are the other types of partnering organisations?
- **Funding.** Is the partnership funded through an external grant from a donor? Does the funding come from contributions of the partners themselves? What other funding options are there?
- **Sharing of responsibility.** Does a Global South partner lead? Does a Global North partner lead?
- **Governance.** Was a steering committee set up to oversee the partnership? Were senior figures (e.g. from faculty of the partner organisations) appointed to partnership's leadership roles?
- **Management arrangements.** At what level are the partner organisations engaged in the partnership. Is it through a Vice-Chancellor's Office, through the International Office, through faculty departments, or is there another arrangement in place?

Based on these attributes, we then developed an analytical framework which played an important role in our fieldwork and informed what information we collected about the partnerships.

In our mapping, we have identified a large number of combinations of the above attributes in existing partnerships, although some attributes tend to prevail. This is an example of external grants which are more common than internal fund-raising. Similarly, we have seen more North-led partnership than those with a Global South partner in the lead.

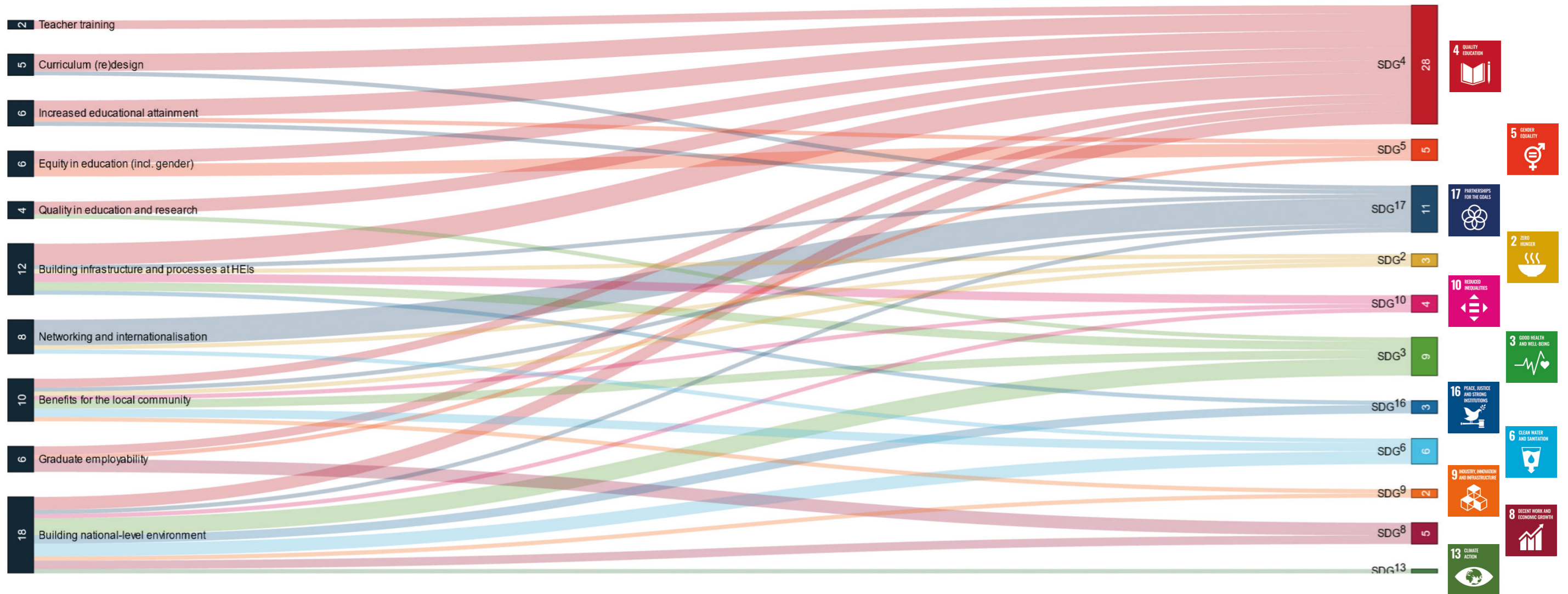
Figure 24 provides an overview of the distribution of the types of partner organisations involved in the partnerships that we mapped (approximately 100 partnerships). Higher education institutions are the only type of organisations involved in approximately one quarter of the partnerships. Almost one fifth of the partnerships is composed of higher education institutions and government bodies, whilst in 15% of the mapped partnerships, higher education institutions partner with NGOs. However, in almost one third of cases, the partner organisations combine other, often more than two, types.

Figure 24 - Types of partner organisations involved



Source: Technopolis and KCL

Figure 23 - Interlinkages between partnerships outcomes and the SDGs (for the ten case studies in focus)



Source: Technopolis, based on the case studies.

The specific composition of the multistakeholder partnerships certainly influences the contribution to the SDGs and, despite often being challenging, it can be incredibly positive for the outcomes of the whole partnership. Addressing the SDGs (which are linked to wider societal issues) means that a multidisciplinary and multisectoral approach is necessary from the partnerships. This, in turn, requires that higher education institutions partner also with organisations outside higher education. This is a challenge because working with private sector organisations, but also NGOs and local community organisations still does not come naturally to many higher education institutions. The different sectors often “speak different languages” and have different incentives for engaging in mutually collaborative projects. Academics aim at undertaking research, whilst community organisations often have only little research capacity, which results in differences in how the various organisations perceive the importance of knowledge. Therefore, partners need to ensure that they are aware of the added value that each of them brings to the partnerships, complementarities resulting from their participation, but also each other’s limitations. VLIR-UOS in Belgium, for example, encourages future partners to conduct a stakeholder analysis for the proposal. UNESCO supports the Knowledge for Change Consortium for training in community-based participatory research.<sup>14</sup>

There is not enough robust evidence to suggest that the funding arrangements of partnerships directly influence the degree of contribution to the SDGs. International aid donors often do not play the most

active role in determining the specific activities and/or daily management of the partnership, and so, their direct influence over how exactly the partnerships address the SDGs is somewhat limited.

However, there is considerable power that external funders can exercise over the funded partnerships, which can have significant effect on the partnerships’ contribution to the SDGs. We have observed that some of the traditional donors in the Global North, such as NORAD, SIDA, DANIDA, DAAD and VLIR-UOS, are going to put more emphasis in their next programming periods on ensuring that their funded portfolio directly contributes to the SDGs. This will be reflected in funders’ operations in various ways:

- **Funding application process.** Applicants will be increasingly asked to clearly demonstrate in their proposals that their partnerships will contribute to the SDGs and how specifically this will happen
- **Interim and ex-post monitoring.** Some funders are currently in the process of re-developing monitoring frameworks for the funded portfolio, which will include more indicators specifically linked to the SDGs

This push from the funders is, therefore, something that distinguishes the externally funded partnerships from those that raise their funding in other ways.

In addition to this more traditional model of a relationship between an external funder and a funded partnership, in one of our case studies we studied in depth a specific example of a partnership between a funder and a university, and how that influences the partnership’s contribution to the SDGs.

**Figure 25** - MasterCard Foundation Scholars Program and its contribution to the SDGs

This case provides an interesting example of a partnership between a funder and a university (MasterCard Foundation Scholars Program). In this case the funder, the MasterCard Foundation, is a philanthropic organisation rather than a governmental organisation. This may be why the partnership is less driven by the SDGs as explicit program objectives, however the case shows how well aligned the overall objectives of the Scholars program, and the overall strategy of the MCF, are to the SDGs.

What is potentially different, particularly in relation to the Scholars program, is that it is driven by a desire to create transformation leaders of the future. With respect to the SDGs, this objective is potentially an “assumption” through which many of the SDGs can be realised, or a “condition” for success. The assumption is that having transformational leaders in Africa will drive change and support the continent in solving societal challenges.

Source: Technopolis, KCL (case study)

The collected evidence does not allow us to make robust statements on whether the other attributes of the partnership models, i.e. sharing of responsibility, governance and management arrangements significantly influence the degree to which the partnership contributes to the SDGs. Based on our observations and analysis, it can be concluded that rather than a single attribute of partnership models directly influencing the degree of contribution to the SDGs, it is more a combination of multiple attributes, such as types of organisations involved, funding and governance arrangements, duration of the partnerships and others, that determines the degree of contribution. As the combination of these attributes is often unique to each partnership, it is important to look at each partnership holistically when assessing the degree of contribution and why it is different in other partnerships. However, more research, coupled with a longer-term engagement with existing partnerships, would allow to collect data on how pursued objectives around wider societal challenges affect the design of the partnership and vice versa and how this shapes the operations of the partnerships over time.

Nevertheless, we identified a number of drivers of the contribution to the SDGs which tend to apply across partnerships with various attributes. These are further analysed in the next section.

### 3.3.5. Drivers of the contribution to the SDGs

There are multiple factors driving the contribution of international higher education partnerships to the SDGs. The SDGs represent an overarching framework (see Section 3.1) for many international higher education partnerships. In this respect, achieving a substantial contribution to the UN’s Sustainable Development Agenda is certainly one of the measures of success for partnerships, albeit often less explicitly articulated, as our research shows. Therefore, drivers of an effective contribution of partnerships to the SDGs are, in essence, the same as those that facilitate the success of the whole partnership as such.

#### Open communication and mutual trust

Open, honest and regular cooperation is a very important driver for partnerships. International partnerships often bring together partners from different continents, which implies cultural differences and different values. In order for the

partnership to be successful, the partners must develop an environment in which they are willing to listen and learn to understand each other’s perspective. Similarly, no partnership can successfully work without mutual trust among its partners. The importance of these factors was repeatedly mentioned in our case studies, and we have seen examples of partnerships where when these factors were removed, the effectiveness of the partnership and working relationships really suffered.

Internal communication among the partners can be facilitated in a number of ways. The Climate Proof Vietnam partnership (funded by NUFFIC, the Netherlands), for example, appointed a project manager from the lead organisation to be resident at one of the partner organisations in the Global South.

#### Shared vision and long-term commitment to working together

All partners need to share a vision. A common vision enables the partners to be adaptive to external opportunities and challenges. It is critical that the partners share a common understanding of the policy issue that the partnerships aim to address. This is evidenced both in literature<sup>15</sup> and comes through our interviews with the partnerships.

Mutual interest in lasting cooperation goes hand in hand with the shared vision. Those partnerships which are driven by a genuine interest of the partners in working with each other, rather than by a need to implement a specific project, last much longer and generate better outcomes for the partners, their communities and also the funders of the partnership.

In eight of our ten case studies, the longevity of the partnerships, often going back a decade or more, was clearly highlighted as an important success factor. See figures below with some specific examples. The existence of prior working relationship between the partners also has practical implications. It transpires from the interviews with some of the international aid donors and international organisations that partnerships submitting a proposal for grant funding are encouraged to demonstrate prior experience of working together in their application (this is the practice, for example, of DAAD and European Commission’s Erasmus+ grant competitions).

14. More information available online at: <https://www.unescochair-cbrsr.org/k4c-2/>

15. Geogalakis, J. and P. Rose (2019) Exploring Research-Policy Partnerships in International Development

**Figure 26** - Long-term nature of the Prepared of Practice partnership (SPHEIR programme, funded by FCDO)

The long-term nature of the partnership has meant it has existed both with and without grant funding. This has generated trust between partners and required a strategic use of often limited resources. The purpose of pursuing grant funding has been to take the partnerships' work to scale, rather than as a driver to enter into partnership.

Source: Technopolis, KCL (case study)

**Figure 27** - Long-term relationship between UCL (UK) and institutions in Tanzania

The GroFutures partnership was a consequence of long-term engagement in Tanzania between UCL and the Ministry of Water and Irrigation, Sokoine University and the University of Dar Es Salaam. Collaboration had been in place for 12 years before the development of this partnership and preceded GroFutures. The partnership was not developed around available grants but emerged out of long-term relationships built on trust and aligned goals.

Source: Technopolis, KCL (case study)

**Figure 28** - Previous working relationship between the Climate Proof Vietnam partners (funded by NUFFIC)

International higher education partnerships between Dutch and Vietnamese universities go back a long way. Climate Proof Vietnam is a project that builds on a 20 year long and trustful collaboration between Delft University of Technology and Vietnamese higher education institutions. The added value of the continued international partnership lies in trust, mutual understanding, knowledge exchange, capacity building and continuous curriculum and skills improvement.

Source: Technopolis, KCL (case study)

#### Engagement of the senior leadership

We have observed that those partnerships where senior leaderships figures are either personally involved or show a strong institutional commitment and support for the partnerships, tend to work more efficiently. Not only does their involvement provides

more legitimacy to the partnership internally within the partner organisations, and externally (for relations with the other partners and external environment and communities), but their authority also facilitates the commitment of the necessary staff at the partner organisation.

**Figure 29** - Involvement of senior university managers in the Developing Pedagogy for 21st Century Skills in Nepal partnership (funded by EDUFI)

International higher education partnerships between Dutch and Vietnamese universities go back a long way. Climate Proof Vietnam is a project that builds on a 20 year long and trustful collaboration between Delft University of Technology and Vietnamese higher education institutions. The added value of the continued international partnership lies in trust, mutual understanding, knowledge exchange, capacity building and continuous curriculum and skills improvement.

Source: Technopolis, KCL (case study)

#### Flexibility of funders, donors and fund managers

Experience of international partnerships shows that a degree of flexibility on the side of funders, donors and fund managers is necessary in order for an international partnership to be able to operate efficiently and achieve success. Partnerships bring

together different partners from different countries who all have to comply with their internal institutional and national financial rules. Therefore, funders, donors and fund managers should show as much flexibility as possible and be reasonable.

#### National-level quality assessment criteria and international university rankings

The collected evidence revealed another, a less common driver for international partnerships and their contribution to the SDGs: national-level higher education and research quality assessment criteria and international university rankings.

A number of countries, including in the Global South, have introduced or are in the process of introducing reforms of national systems of higher education and research quality assessment, which often include an indicator (or a set of indicators) around international collaboration of higher education institutions and the number of international projects, as well as international mobility. These are areas for which international higher education partnerships can be hugely beneficial, and therefore such assessment criteria act as a driver for international partnerships. This is the case, for example, in India, where the National Ranking Framework is a motivation for Indian higher education institutions to become more involved in international collaborative projects. At the international level, university rankings work in a similar way as described above. The most commonly used rankings generally consider indicators around international collaboration as one of the standard indicators based on which universities are ranked globally.

It is important to add that international university rankings are not unanimously accepted by the international higher education community. They face criticism, for example, for their overreliance on research-focused indicators (e.g. academic citations) and for the use of indicators around reputation (gauged often through surveys, risking a biased view from the respondents).

#### Risk management

An effective and functional risk management system in place is a critical success factor. International partnerships face multiple risks at any point in time throughout partnerships' duration. Regular risk assessment and following up on both internal and external changes possibly affecting the partnership in the future is necessary.

#### 3.3.6. Challenges in the contribution to the SDGs

Each partnership faces challenges. There is a variety of challenges that we identified in our research. In the scoping report, we presented an overview of challenges based on the existing literature<sup>16</sup> and scoping interviews. Our primary data then put these into a specific context of international higher education partnerships. The challenges can be grouped into the following clusters:

#### Covid-19 pandemic

The Covid-19 pandemic is certainly not only a health-related issue. There are clear linkages between the Covid-19 pandemic and many SDGs. For example, Covid-19 disrupts the way education, i.e. SDG4, has been traditionally provided. SDG8 (decent work and economic growth) and SDG9 (industry, innovation and infrastructure) are other evident examples significantly affected by the pandemic.

International higher education partnerships have been severely affected by the pandemic. Perhaps the most significant area of their activities disrupted by the pandemic was mobility (of both academics and students) which happens within the framework of the partnerships. Our research shows this has stopped almost completely. This affects core partnership management teams, because they are unable to meet, but also those academics or researchers who work on the implementation of the activities, where mobility is often a key element. Student mobility is a common component of partnerships as well, ranging from undergraduate student exchange to PhD researchers visits to partner universities. For a lot of partnerships, international mobility of students has also been an important part of their revenue, so there is a considerable financial implication for the whole institution too.

The way forward requires a large degree of flexibility, creativity and improvisation from the partners, but also from the funders. Currently, more than a year after the breakout of the pandemic, we have seen that many partnerships have found a new *modus operandi*. This has, nevertheless, its limits. Training could be provided online, for example, but more strategic and structural discussions are very difficult to happen in the online environment only.

Those partnerships set up before the Covid-19 pandemic tend to continue, however new ones may find it more difficult to form due to reduced opportunities to make contacts. We may see fewer new partnerships in the months and years coming unfortunately.

However, there are also a few examples of international partnerships where the Covid-19 pandemic has not caused significant issues, mostly because the partnerships were well prepared, or even expected, to operate online.

16. For example Power, L., Millington, K.A. and Bengtsson, S. (2015) Building Capacity in Higher Education Topic Guide.



**Figure 30** - The partnership around the Centre of Excellence for Sustainable Health (funded by SIDA)

The current Covid-19 pandemic has put a strain on global partnerships. Since the Centre of Excellence for Sustainable Health is a virtual centre, the persons involved in the partnership are able to continue engagement. The establishment of the Centre has therefore been timely in that digital tools have been improved, which in turn allows a digital partnership to evolve and also allows the operations of the Centre to continue with bi-weekly meetings.

Source: Technopolis, KCL (case study)

### Complex governance structures at higher education institutions and resistance to change

Higher education institutions are organisations with highly complex governance and management structures, which poses challenges for those partnerships which aim at instigating institutional change. Furthermore, there is well-observed and documented resistance to change within higher education institutions, which makes institutional reforms initiated by the partnerships even more challenging.

Higher education has traditionally been a place where knowledge, values and traditions are preserved, and this has been seen as one of its successes. However, this attitude to conservatism, in turn makes higher education institutions resistant to change. The resistance starts at the level of individual staff members who all have different levels of tolerance to change (often taking root in their perception of the consequences of such change, e.g. redundancies, change in job role). At higher education institutions, it is often the senior academics, not administrative staff, who are in charge of the key internal processes and policies. It is a challenge for the partnerships to convince the senior academics internally that change is necessary as they often perceive their roles as something to which they have invested a lot of effort over time and which resulted in their well-established attitudes and ideals.<sup>17</sup>

### Insufficient capacity to manage international projects at partner institutions

The in-depth research conducted for the case studies shows that partner organisations in the Global South often lack the institutional capacity necessary to manage international partnerships and international projects, or participation of the institutions in these projects. There are multiple

reasons for this: little or no previous experience with international projects, lack of internal processes and infrastructure supporting the participation in international projects and technical and project management skills of staff. In addition, we found through research for this study (but also in our previous work in this area) that partner organisations in the Global South often battle with a lack of internal resources, especially when in-kind contributions are expected from the partners, for example project assistance and secretariat.

Although some international development aid donors, such as NORAD, enabled the partners in the Global South to manage and coordinate partnerships in the past, there is evidence that the grant management is returning to partners in the Global North (see Figure 31). That is not to say that donors see the imbalances in power between partners as unproblematic. On the contrary, they increasingly push for more equitable partnerships based on a shared vision, shared responsibilities and mutually beneficial (see Section 3.2). Nevertheless, the grant management as such requires certain knowledge of financial rules and a variety of skills, which, could be too big a challenge for new partners, especially at the beginning of a partnership.

### Volatility of the funding environment

Reliance on short-term project funding poses a significant challenge for many international higher education partnerships, especially for the sustainability of their results. It is important that the partnerships consider diverse opportunities for funding a variety of funding sources. In addition, the commitment of partners to long-term mutual collaboration, rather than to a specific project only, helps to bridge the gap between periods when external funding is available.

**Figure 31** - Experience with coordination and grant management role in NORHED's Policy and Governance Studies in South Asia partnership (funded by NORAD)

Enabling Southern partners to manage and coordinate the NORHED projects was a significant departure from previous programmes and was regarded as an important step towards the achievement of the programme objectives. However, it appears that this has been challenging for a number of reasons. Like many universities in low-income (and indeed, high income) countries, Tribhuvan University (the project lead) had limited resources and experience with managing a large international development grant. Implementation was initially slow, and this caused some frustrations. The partners needed intensive support from the funder, particularly at the beginning of the project to ensure that the project was managed in accordance with donor expectations. As a result, Norad initially had less capacity to engage at a more strategic level. Norad has revisited the model and grant management responsibilities will shift to Norwegian partners for the next stage of the programme.

Source: Technopolis, KCL (case study)

### 3.3.7. Monitoring and measuring the contribution to the SDGs

Accurate monitoring and measurement of the progress to the SDGs remains a significant challenge for the international community.<sup>18</sup> The SDGs provide a framework applicable in a number of contexts, at various levels (national, regional and local), by a multitude of actors and in any country. Yet, the system of data collection against the SDGs indicators, including the ways how contributions of individual projects and communities could be aggregated at the necessary levels, needs improvement, and more capacity is necessary, especially in the Global South. This is true despite the fact that each SDG works as a high-level target, but at the same time, it is a composite indicator (i.e. built from several indicators, and for each of them different data has to be collected), and one could, therefore, claim that this operationalisation would make the data collection easier.

International higher education partnerships are no exception in this respect. Our research points to significant shortcomings in the ways partnerships and their funders monitor their contribution to the SDGs. This is often caused by the general lack of capacity, as highlighted above. However, the interviews with representatives of higher education institutions also show that for some researchers and academics, it is generally difficult to see the importance of mapping their research against the SDGs, and they often struggle to see the alignment. On the other hand, universities and other organisations applying for grant funding increasingly observe that demonstrating the contribution to the SDGs is already part of the funding application process.

Some international aid donors have their own mechanisms in place through which they monitor, track and measure how and to what extent their funded portfolio contributes to the SDGs. The figure below showcases the approach applied by DAAD in Germany.

17. Caruth, G.D. and D.L. Caruth (2013) Understanding Resistance to Change: A Challenge for Universities

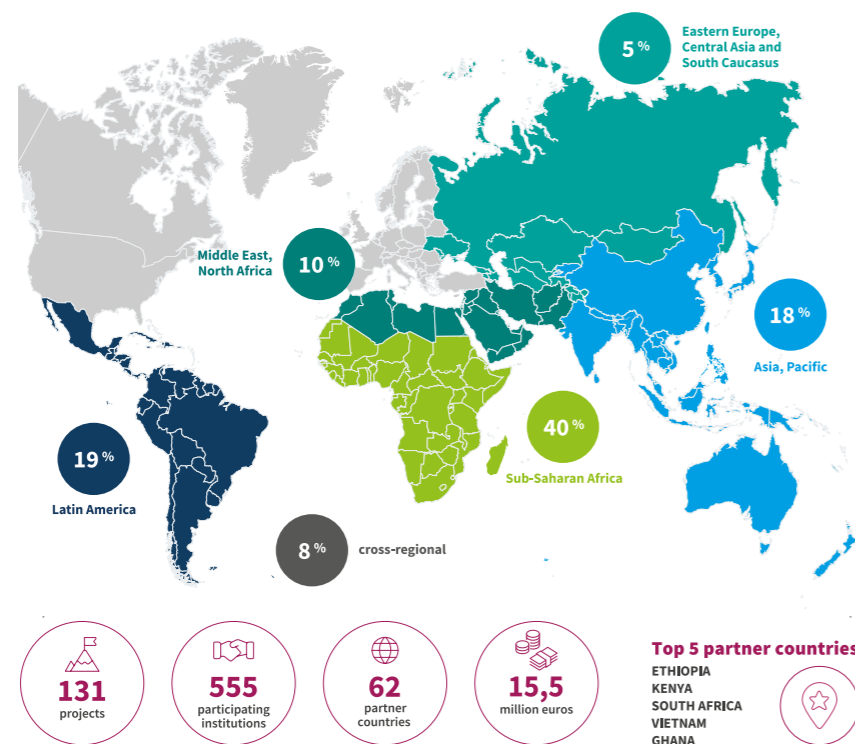
18. See, for example, Ligami, C. (2021) Targets and indicators necessary to track progress on SDGs

**Figure 32 - DAAD's approach to monitoring the progress towards the SDGs**

DAAD (the German Academic Exchange Service, an agency of German higher education institutions) produces infographics and factsheets on the results and impacts of support with funds provided through international HE partnerships by the Federal Ministry for Economic Cooperation and Development in Germany (the figures below contain data for 2019).

### Target countries of the partnerships

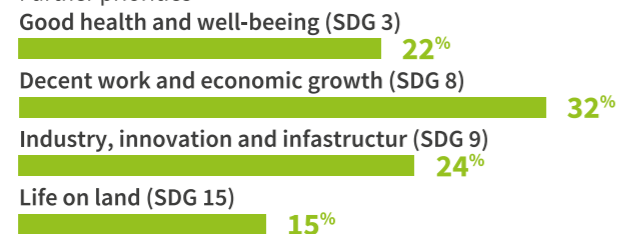
Our funding programmes are present and in demand all over the world



### Contribution to the Agenda 2030

All higher education cooperations support the goals "Quality education" (SDG 4) and "Partnerships for the goals" (SDG 17)

Further priorities



Despite making these materials publicly available (as part of wider communication towards DAAD's stakeholders), as the interviewees pointed out, there is still a scope for improvement. Knowing more about how much DAAD's funding contributes to the SDGs is currently high on the agenda for DAAD. The impetus to perform closer monitoring comes from the Global South more often than from the Global North, despite the Sustainable Development Agenda being applicable to both Global South and Global North. Although DAAD sometimes monitors the progress to the SDGs retrospectively, for the future, it is their intention to enhance the explicit links to the SDGs in theories of change of the partnerships they fund.

Source: DAAD, [https://static.daad.de/media/daad\\_de/der-daad/was-wir-tun/210503\\_daad\\_factsheet\\_hochschulen\\_en.pdf](https://static.daad.de/media/daad_de/der-daad/was-wir-tun/210503_daad_factsheet_hochschulen_en.pdf) and [https://static.daad.de/media/daad\\_de/der-daad/was-wir-tun/210503\\_daad\\_factsheet\\_hochschulen\\_en.pdf](https://static.daad.de/media/daad_de/der-daad/was-wir-tun/210503_daad_factsheet_hochschulen_en.pdf); and [interview with DAAD representatives](#).

DANIDA (Denmark), NORAD (Norway), VLIR-UOS (Belgium), NUFFIC (the Netherlands) and SIDA (Sweden) are other examples of donors who collect data from their funded partnerships on the progress to the SDGs, albeit in a non-harmonised manner. The partnerships are often allowed to put forward the SDGs of their choice (based on the relevance of their projects) and monitor their progress to these.

The interviews with all of them, as well as with selected academics in the Global South, highlighted

that the awareness about the SDGs in the higher education community is on the rise and there exist a number of higher education institutions, both in the Global South and Global North that actively promote the SDGs. In addition, these funders also aim to put more emphasis on the SDGs monitoring in their next funding periods.

Another example of good practice is the approach applied by the Commonwealth Scholarship Commission in the UK (Figure 33).

**Figure 33 - Approach of the Commonwealth Scholarship Commission to monitoring the progress towards the SDGs**

The Commonwealth Scholarship Commission produces regularly a magazine showcasing specific stories of individuals holding a Commonwealth scholarship.<sup>19</sup> Each story is complemented with a clear indication of contribution to an SDG (or multiple SDGs). Each story within this report is tagged with the SDG(s) the study or research relates to – demonstrating how Commonwealth Scholars and Fellows are making a meaningful contribution to sustainable development.

### Pourcentage of Commonwealth Scholarships applicable to each Sustainable Development Goal

The data below reflects the SDGs covered by Scholarships awarded 2019 (up to 3 selected per Scholar)



The role of higher education scholarships is officially recognised (and called upon) by the UN. The Sustainable Development Agenda includes, as a target, to "substantially expand globally the number of scholarships available to developing countries, in particular least developed countries, small island developing States and African countries, for enrolment in higher education."<sup>20</sup>

Source: Commonwealth Scholarship Commission (2020) *Delivering a common future: Annual report for the year ending 30 September 2020*.

<sup>19</sup> Commonwealth Scholarship Commission (2021) *Common Knowledge: A resilient future Building back stronger in a post-COVID-19 world*.  
<sup>20</sup> More in Cosentino, C., Fortson, J., Liuzzi, S., Harris, A. and R. Blair (2019) Can scholarships provide equitable access to high-quality university education? Evidence from the Mastercard Foundation Scholars Program In *International Journal of Educational Development* 71 (2019)

The wider stakeholders whom we interviewed for study (e.g. representatives of university management, senior researchers, both from the Global South and Global North) agreed that significantly more effort is necessary to develop a monitoring framework and data collection mechanisms that would allow for regular monitoring of the progress to the SDGs, producing data comparable across the SDGs and across countries, and which could also be used at a local level.

Higher education partnerships play a major role in the monitoring of the progress to the SDGs. In many countries, especially in the Global North, where the state-run statistical services are less developed, it is often researchers funded from specific international projects who are the only ones collecting and understanding the data in their respective countries and communities on a wide range of societal challenges, such as access to education, water pollution and food quality. In addition, partnerships are pivotal in communicating about the progress towards the SDGs to their respective communities, but also to the wider public.

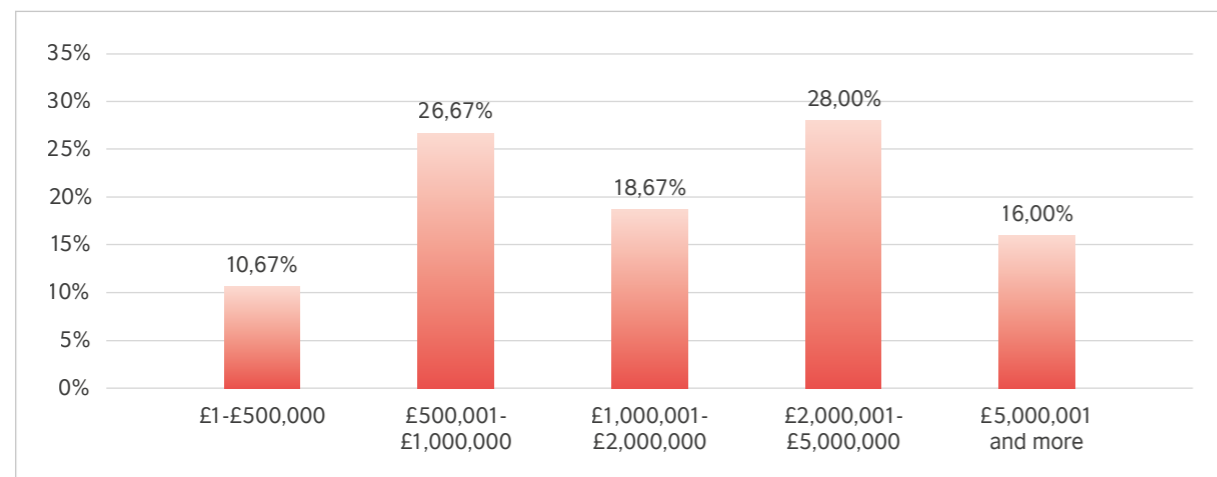
### 3.4. Cost-effectiveness of partnership models

#### High degree of variability of budgets

The high degree of variability of international higher education partnerships applies also to the budgets. In our mapping, budgets of the partnerships ranged from £119,068 (a partnership funded by IDRC, Canada) to £869,898,000 (MasterCard Foundation Scholar Program), with the mean budget of £1,764,440.<sup>21</sup>

Figure 34 plots the distribution of the partnerships into budget brackets. Exactly 28% of the partnerships had a budget between £2 million and £5 million, closely followed by partnerships with budgets between £500 thousand and £1 million. This means that 84% of all mapped partnerships had budgets smaller than £5 million. It is important to note that the sample of the mapped partnerships is not representative of the global population of higher education partnerships although a high number of the flagship funding schemes of the major international aid donors were included in the mapping.

Figure 34 - Distribution of partnerships by budget



Source: Technopolis and KCL (n=75)

#### Assessing the cost-effectiveness of international higher education partnerships

Budgetary information on the partnerships has to be always assessed together with a number of other variables, especially when it comes to the assessment partnerships cost-effectiveness, such as the following:

- Duration
- Number of partners and their types
- Focus of activities, the number of outputs and outcomes produces
- Price levels in the countries of operation

This all makes any meaningful comparison of the cost-effectiveness across partnerships very difficult. This is not to say that such an assessment cannot be conducted. On the contrary, cost-effectiveness is one of the useful indicators of the overall efficiency of partnerships, providing valuable information to the funders and partnerships themselves. Nevertheless, these assessments are always resource intensive as they require quantification of the outputs and monetisation of the outcomes of the partnership. Therefore, they require very in-depth and accurate data collection, which can generally be undertaken only as part of evaluation studies.

21. The arithmetic average is £15,061,894.15. However, this is skewed by a small number of partnerships which are outliers in the sense that their budgets are very large.

In such studies, a small number of comparator partnerships (with significant similarities with the partnerships that is subject to the evaluation) could be selected in order to perform a benchmarking exercise.

Given the scope of the study in hand and the fact that we studied partners where any quantitative comparison would often be rendered meaningless, we did not perform such assessment of cost-effectiveness of partnerships for this study. Further

research will be necessary with a much narrower focus on a very low number of comparable partnerships to assess their cost-effectiveness.

Technopolis applies a robust methodology to assess the cost-effectiveness of international partnerships, usually as part of evaluation studies commissioned by the funders. Such assessment is usually part of a wider Value for Money analysis, for which the “4 Es” approach is applied. (Figure 35)

Figure 35 - Value for Money and the 4 Es

- **Economy:** are project inputs of the appropriate quality at the right price (planning, staff, consultants etc)?
- **Efficiency:** how well are the inputs being converted to outputs (spending well)?
- **Effectiveness:** are the outputs produced by the projects having the intended effect on the HEIs (spending wisely)?
- **Equity:** How fairly are the benefits distributed (spending fairly)?

Data collection will generally involve both qualitative data (interviews with stakeholders around the produced benefits) and quantitative data to inform the Value for Money framework. In Figure 36, we

present a generic Value for Money framework which can be tailored to an evaluation of a specific partnership.

Figure 36 - A generic Value for Money framework

Value for Money practice	Value for Money category	Value for Money evidence (examples)
Strategy formulation	Efficiency Effectiveness Equity	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Financial allocation alignment with the strategy of the funder</li> <li>• Gender and equity in the strategy</li> </ul>
Understanding of beneficiary types and ability to target	Efficiency Equity	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Involvement of a wide range of HEIs, including their staff and students</li> <li>• Links with external environment and levels of engagement</li> <li>• Gender embeddedness throughout the partnerships</li> </ul>
Partnerships aligned to strategy and well described	Effectiveness Efficiency	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Clear articulation of objectives of funded partnerships, and alignment with the funder's strategy</li> <li>• The breadth of partnerships and addressing the needs of HEIs</li> </ul>
Suitably sized partnerships	Economy Effectiveness	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Money commensurate with the expected activities</li> <li>• Balance of activities</li> </ul>
Outcome and impact indicators relevant and robust	Effectiveness	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Monitoring arrangements and coverage of all components of Theories of Change</li> <li>• Satisfaction with the produced benefits and whether these met the expectations of partners and funders</li> <li>• Spill over effects generated by the partnerships</li> </ul>
Commitment of partners	Efficiency	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Level of commitment per partner</li> </ul>
Learning	Effectiveness	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Knowledge sharing, learning from the previous funding rounds</li> </ul>

Source: Technopolis

## 3.5. Sustainability of the international HE partnerships

### 3.5.1. Introduction

Sustainability is the ability to continue a mission or programme far into the future and to leave a lasting impact beyond the end of a project. It is done through balancing the economic, socio-political, cultural and environmental factors in the project context to meet the stakeholder needs in a way that does not deplete the required resources in the long run. In addition to the external factors, partnership brings the importance of internal dynamics to the forefront. From uneven commitment, confusion about the partnership objectives to cultural misunderstandings human error and misunderstandings can affect effective practices.<sup>22</sup>

This section presents the analysed evidence and resulting synthesis on the sustainability of international higher education partnerships, and the factors which influence the sustainability. It uses the evidence collected through the mapping, interviews, case studies and literature. The first part focuses on the factors and issues impacting partnerships internally, exploring the importance of good relations and division of responsibilities. It will then move on to observe the driving factors in the wider community and the sustainability of the produced outputs before finally considering the current impacts of the Covid-19 pandemic on the sustainability and the subsequent move to the virtual space.

### 3.5.2. Teamwork and internal relations

International higher education partnerships are no strangers to collaboration between vastly different contexts and cultures. A failure to converge various motivations and ultimate objectives has caused problems in international partnerships before. In the

same vein, adhering to unfamiliar regulations and funder requirements is known to take some additional measures.

Across the case studies, good, and ideally, pre-existing relationships between partners were considered a critical driving factor and a prerequisite for sustainable success. Building on existing relationships and experiences creates streams of sustainable projects and results Existing working communities, personal relationships and regular collaborations impact the readiness to work together and tend to ensure partnerships between the same HEIs continue beyond current projects. This was the case for example in the Policy and Governance Studies in South Asia founded by NORAD and Climate Proof Vietnam founded by NUFFIC. The REPESEA partnership of the ERASMUS+ programme in turn saw the lasting relationships between partners as a valuable result for sustainability, producing several memoranda of understanding and sparking further collaborations building on the existing knowledge and experience for further initiatives.

An important core point of sustainability, embedded in the good relationships ethos is building trust between partners. It was found to be a catalyst for seamless collaboration and a strong assurance for a mutual mission and motivations. Indeed, the Groundwater Futures in Sub-Saharan Africa partnership considered the importance of trust to be among the main lessons for sustainability. Inversely, they found the absence of trust to negatively and considerably impact the effectiveness and results achieved in the past. In the same vein, the partners in Climate Proof Vietnam at the introduction of new personnel at the institutional level deemed it necessary to invest time to build trust. This is also a core attribute for equity (see section 3.2.1).

**Figure 37** - Pre-existing relationships as a key factor of the sustainability (Karolinska Institutet and the University of Makerere; funded by SIDA)

The success factors for the Centre of Excellence in Sustainable Health in its early establishment has been the longstanding relationship between Karolinska Institutet and the University of Makerere. The collaboration has built trust between the universities as well as the respective staff involved in the Centre. This has further contributed to a common understanding of those involved of what they are going to do to achieve the SDGs. The long-standing partnership has also contributed to an anchoring of the Centre in both universities leading to a visionary leadership without micromanagement – the right people are therefore involved at the right level. The alignment of the Centre's activities with the universities' regular activities and aim/mission further contributes to the sustainability of funding, more collaborations, development of courses and training opportunities, and reinforcement of diplomatic relations.

Source: *Technopolis (case study)*

The failure to converge on agreed upon and understood goals for the partnership is considered the oldest lesson learnt from international HE partnerships. Administrative differences as well as differences in terminology are likely in these collaborations. As mentioned before, established working relationships are the most effective way to counter this risk. Embedded in those, and required for new partnerships time and time again, is the time investment in open and transparent communication and openness to different viewpoints. International partnerships may entail collaborations between highly differing cultures. This is recognised in the Developing Pedagogy for 21st Century Skills partnership which presses for the awareness of the different opinions and values as well as for the willingness to listen and learn from one another even if differences in opinions remain.

The responsibility dynamic is another point raised in some of partnerships as an aspect of consideration for producing sustainable results. Coordinating a number of partners all subject to the potential of institutional shifts can be an unpredictable task. This concern was present during the REPESEA partnership when one European partner dropped out and another went through a departmental restructuring. As in this case, agility in reshuffling assigned responsibilities is an important skill. Over-reliance on a few key individuals is a risk even when the departure of those individuals is to be expected and planned for. To ensure consistency despite turnover, the partnership would ideally develop a system with embedded governance procedures and appropriately distributed leadership responsibilities from the start.

### 3.5.3. Engaging stakeholders and community

Beyond academic sustainability, many of the studied partnerships aimed for sustainable societal or sectoral impacts. This would not be possible in the long-term without the active engagement of the stakeholders and communities outside the HEIs. Local and institutional stakeholders do not only build a steady basis for a project but enable risk monitoring as well as dissemination of the results in the appropriate audiences.

Climate Proof Vietnam emphasised the importance of involving a diverse range of stakeholders from different sectors for an in-depth understanding of the context of the intervention. In their strategy, HEIs were consulted for training and teaching, the private sector on the local market and others on a nuanced understanding of the field. This has allowed the partnership to build a holistic long-term impact vision in the local context.

In a similar effort to work closely with the relevant stakeholders, the Developing Pedagogy for 21<sup>st</sup> Century Skills in Nepal partnership developed a year-long management review cycle engaging all key stakeholders and partners. This practice was created as a means of risk monitoring, and the partaking peoples are asked to consider potentials that might affect the planned actions for the upcoming project year.

To avoid challenges in inter-sectoral collaboration, however, it is vital to recognise the diversity of these groups as well as their interests and requirements. To this end, the Groundwater Futures in Sub-Saharan Africa carried out a stakeholder requirement mapping process at the start of the partnership and, in hindsight, it was felt that this practice could have been repeated during the project timeline. In order to effectively collaborate with their stakeholders at the governing level, a related programme to theirs used Knowledge Brokers to disseminate evidence for the local governance bodies and considered involving individuals within a relevant ministry to maximise the project representation.

Partnership sustainability can be looked at in various different ways. Thus far the focus has been largely on the sustainability of the partnerships and projects, but the long-term impact of a partnership should emerge through its results. The ideal sustainability outcome in these interventions tends to be the adoption of developed tools, policies or practices in the surrounding communities and wider society. Ultimately, creating local ownership of these outcomes would ideally result in independent continuation and further adaptation of the practice according to the local need.

The Prepared for Practice partnership approached this goal in their strategy by implementing practice approaches in the training of health professionals and institutionalising them at the partner institutions. The activities to this end, the practices were designed and delivered by the local partners in collaboration with UK volunteers. The ultimate success of these practices resulted in a capacity at the local universities to become autonomous in carrying out these training interventions.

22. Landford, M (2019) Long-Term Sustainability in Global Higher Education Partnerships In Al-Youbi A. et al. Successful Global Collaborations in Higher Education Institutions. Springer, Cham. [https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-030-25525-1\\_9](https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-030-25525-1_9).

**Figure 38** - Prepared for Practice; institutionalisation of best practice approaches in project partner universities (funded by FCDO/DFID)

Clinical supervision practice: to be prepared for their roles as clinicians, medical, nursing and midwifery students must have sufficient opportunities to apply theoretical knowledge to real world settings and develop their skills and behaviours in a clinical environment. In its early years the project funded 24 clinical supervisor salaries (8 per partner institutions) who are responsible for overseeing students' learning in a clinical setting. Funding for these positions has been tapered through the project, with a view to identify a sustainable national source of funding. These positions are now funded jointly by the Ministry of Health Development and Somaliland universities.

Source: Technopolis (case study)

### 3.5.4. Impacts of the Covid-19 pandemic on the sustainability of partnerships

By design, international higher education partnerships often include international mobility in their activities. The emergence of the global pandemic in 2019, and the subsequent standstill of most global travel has, thus impacted the landscape and the ongoing partnerships to a significant degree. With the future of the pandemic still uncertain, it is difficult to predict the full extent of its impact on the sustainability of the current and future partnerships. It has, however, appeared to have hindered the possibilities for future projects and postponed the completion of current ones.

One outcome in the current situation has been moving the partnerships in virtual spaces with diverse results. To some degree, the shift to virtual learning has enabled a wider access to participation, and this way potentially scaled up impacts. Moreover, virtual education is more cost-effective and potentially contributes to the sustained lifespan of projects. In other cases, where the project or an activity had taken place in a virtual environment prior to the pandemic, operations could continue relatively unaffected or may even have seen an increase in their participation success.

**Figure 39** - African Economic Research Consortium: Collaborative PhD Programme in Economics partnership's approach to the sustainability of virtual learning

Recently, African Economic Research Consortium introduced virtual learning in its collaborative training programme that has helped to reduce costs and enhance inclusivity. Implementation of virtual learning has helped to minimize the disruption to academic calendars of partnering universities, which was a consequence of the COVID-19 pandemic. There has been significant increase in number of students and universities participating in the activities of the Collaborative PhD Programme as a result of virtual learning, with numbers increasing from 13 in 2019 to 32 in 2020. A total of 53 students are expected to enrol in joint teaching of elective courses offered under the collaborative PhD programme in 2021.

Source: Technopolis, KCL (case study)

However, shifting traditionally in-person activities online has not happened without its challenges. For instance, while online learning may grant increased access to participation in some degree, the Policy and Governance Studies in South Asia partnership noted the digital divide between regions effectively walling out prospective students without access to the appropriate tools. As for internal operations, the current confinement in digital spaces has strained the social aspect crucial to the maintaining of partnerships. The virtual space has reportedly impacted strategic planning, creative processes and simply the process of forming relationships in the same way. Some interviewees worried about the formation of new partnerships in the current situation as a whole.

The Covid-19 pandemic has rearranged the international HEI partnership landscape. Some positive aspects have emerged however, including a potential to scale up participation for education and reducing costs through virtual learning. With appropriate investment in opening access to the relevant tools, virtual space may ultimately produce new pathways to sustainability. However, it may also pose a new problem based on regional digital divisions should this access not be scaled up.



### 3.6. Added value of the partnership model

Our analysis of the evidence provides clear indications that international aid interventions taking the form of an international partnership deliver added value, compared to other forms of international aid provision. This is also evident in the section on defining and understanding mutual benefits (section 3.2.5) which shows how this links with equity.

#### Mobilising resources and complementing each other's expertise and experience

Together, partnerships are able to mobilise more resources than single organisations acting on their

own. This means that, by working together, the partners can benefit from access to resources of other partners, from research, teaching and learning infrastructure, human resources, networks to financial resources. In addition, synergies can be generated from sharing resources across the partnership.

Furthermore, partners come to partnerships with their own expertise and experience, which is complementary to that of the other partners. If a single organisation was to work on its own, it could be too difficult or impossible to access the necessary range of skills and experience. We have seen this practically in all case studies.

**Figure 40** - Developing Pedagogy for 21st Century Skills in Nepal (funded by EDUFI, Finland)

The curriculum redesign at Nepalese partner organisations is generally carried out by engaging local experts who have the necessary expertise for the given subject field to modernise the curricula. For the planned new Master's programme, such expertise was not available locally. Therefore, having the international partnership was key to be able to deliver the desired outputs. The partnership allowed to form teams from among the partners and develop the new curricula iteratively in multiple rounds benefitting from the significant expertise the Finnish partners have in the field of teacher training and online and distance education.

Source: Technopolis, KCL (case study)

#### Opportunities for mutual learning, networking and increasing visibility

Partnerships provide opportunities for mutual learning of the partners through working together on partnership's activities and through delivering partnership's outputs and outcomes. Partnerships also create more opportunities for inter-institutional interactions at staff levels, therefore leading to increased degree of networking. Furthermore, working in a partnership can help raise the visibility of all partners externally.

Figure 41 shows an example of the MasterCard Foundation Scholars program and how working together has been allowing the partners to learn from each other. Other consultations for the study in hand raised the issue of the need for more interactions to be facilitated between universities on the African continent (South-South) as in some cases, these relationships are weak and could be strengthened. Partnerships provide opportunities for this and for sustained interactions between universities.

**Figure 41** - Mutual learning in the partnership for the Mastercard Foundation Scholars program

The partnership is about more than funding. The partnership level is where the activities of the MasterCard Foundation program are concentrated. By working through a partnership model, the MasterCard Foundation, and in particular, the Scholars program sets out to leverage the strengths of the partner and give autonomy to innovate and adapt through their own experience. This is very much in line with the values of the Foundation. MasterCard Foundation Scholars Program partners are deliberately organised as learning partnerships to maximise impact and influence change. The partners are focused on a common agenda and agree to common goals and measurement. The learning element is critical in these types of partnerships. The Scholars program is also more than a bilateral relationship as there is a network of partners. The MasterCard Foundation provides the space for learning through "learning convenings".

The interview with the MasterCard Foundation provided more insight into the potential power of the networking aspect of the program. The partnerships are bilateral with the Foundation, but they have always brought the partners together, largely for the purposes of information sharing and knowledge exchange. However, recognising that this type of forum could do much more, there is an intention to set some common goals which will support the partners and leverage the capital in a different way. There are opportunities to be more strategic and to create economies of scale, but also to encourage other links between the organisations.

Source: Technopolis, KCL (case study)

#### Addressing wider societal challenges more efficiently

As discussed in Section 3.3, societal challenges require multi-disciplinary approaches and involvement of various stakeholders who cooperate around the same goal. Given that the most important societal challenges of today affect multiple countries, continents or even the whole globe, international approaches are required. International higher education partnerships are a natural response to this, in particular when bringing communities and other stakeholders on board. This, in turn, creates ownership in the partners and the feeling of mutual responsibility for the outcomes. Our interviews also highlighted that international collaboration generally leads to higher quality research.

#### Facilitating collaboration between different types of organisations

The pursuit of mutual objectives and benefits help the partners break down barriers between various types of organisations that could otherwise find it very difficult to work together, such as higher education institutions with private companies. Although this is often a challenge, at least at the beginning of partnerships, we saw that it also results in success stories in those partnerships that we studied. The Prepared for Practice partnership is a good example of successful collaboration between different types of partnering organisations. (Figure 42)

**Figure 42** - Different types of organisations working together in the Prepared for Practice partnership (funded by DFID/FCDO)

A diverse set of partner organisations – a health partnership, three Somaliland universities, an international NGO and a non-profit technology company – make up the partnership. The roles and responsibilities reflect the distinctive expertise each partner brings.

King's Global Health Partnerships has three main responsibilities: managing the grant, including the relationship with the fund manager, financial management and monitoring, evaluation and learning; leading the partnership in the delivery of the project outcomes; and co-leading the delivery of the undergraduate and institutional workstreams with Somaliland Universities.

Tropical Health Education Trust has three main roles on the project. Their primary role is to lead the policy workstream and delivery of all associated activities. Alongside this they provide in-country coordination support to the delivery of activities under the institutional and undergraduate workstreams. They also lead programme operations in Somaliland, providing security and logistics in the deployment of UK volunteers to Somaliland.

MedicineAfrica manage the projects' educational learning platform, on which the undergraduate and postgraduate courses to students and faculty at Somaliland universities are delivered.

University of Hargeisa, Amoud University and Edna Adan University are the three main implementation sites of the project. They co-lead the delivery of the undergraduate and faculty workstreams at their universities and support the delivery of the policy and regulation workstream.

Source: Technopolis, KCL (case study)

#### Reducing financial and project management risks

Awarding grants to a partnership, instead of a single organisation reduces the risks linked to financial and project management. Our interviews with academics shared their past experience with single-organisation projects which failed because the internal institutional processes were not able to handle the project management. On the other hand, the experience of the REPESEA project shows that even when one of the partners leaves, the partnership can still continue and other partners can step in, although this naturally causes temporary disturbances.

#### Increasing prospects of future funding

Working together in partnership increases the prospects of obtaining future funding. The interviews with partnerships, individual academics, international organisations and funders themselves, highlighted that international funders' increasingly look for evidence of successful prior relationships between the partners before any funding is awarded. For some, such as DAAD, DANIDA, and also the European Commission (Erasmus+, Key Activity 2), this is a binding requirement in the application process. Furthermore, many governments in the Global South provide only small quantities of research funding or do not provide it at all. Partners can, therefore, capitalise further on their previous joint projects and apply together for other grants that are available internationally.

### 3.7. Higher education and sustainable development: building on the success of international HE partnerships

#### Risks linked to partnerships working in isolation

Our mapping shows that the global landscape of international higher education partnerships is very diverse and rich, with many funders (public and private) and with partnerships pursuing different missions and objectives. There are similarities across the programmes supporting international partnerships in the sense that many emphasise the contribution to sustainable development, many require or prioritise significant involvement of organisations from the Global South, and there is an increasing focus on equitable partnerships.

Nevertheless, the number and variety of partnerships also increases the risks of duplicities and inefficiencies in addressing the SDGs, by partnerships working in isolation. The wider stakeholder interviews (i.e. with international organisations, selected academics and funders) shared their concern that in tackling the societal challenges locally, the partnerships often start from the beginning, simply because the partners are often not aware of the solutions already applied elsewhere, albeit in different contexts.

In an effort to coordinate the provision of international aid, the main international donors have been meeting regularly since 2010 when the first Donor Harmonisation Group (DHG) meeting took place in the Netherlands. The DHG aims at sharing know-how and expertise among the donors. This includes sharing knowledge of specific national needs, of their funding programmes and how the SDGs could be integrated in the programming. As such, the DHG provides a powerful platform for discussion how to better coordinate the global effort in addressing the SDGs through investment in international higher education partnerships, how to build on their success, and how to improve the efficiency and effectiveness of international development aid.

However, there exist partnerships without any (or with very little) funding from external donors. We have seen examples of such partnerships established on the mutual agreement of the partners, who invest their own resources into the design and implementation of joint partnership activities. Therefore, coordinating the donors' effort would have only limited effect on these partnerships. Yet, the risks of duplication of activities and inefficient use of resources apply to these partnerships as well.

#### Partnership platforms

International platforms for collaboration of partnerships could serve to address the risks outlined above. By bringing various partnerships together, these platforms can facilitate the capitalisation on previous partnerships' successes, as well as improve the sustainability of their results (for example, if results of one partnership are taken up and used or developed further by another). Partnership platforms can also serve as important mechanisms to bring together stakeholders around crucial issues, and to systematically catalyse partnerships for the SDGs.

The emergence of such platforms is a relatively recent trend. Currently, there are not many fully functioning examples, and further research might be necessary in order to gauge their potential for supporting partnerships. In Figure 43, we, in a nutshell present the IAU HESD Cluster, bringing together universities from around the globe and supporting 16 different partnerships, whilst providing a common platform for knowledge sharing and discussion for all of them.

Figure 43 - IAU HESD Cluster

In 2018, the International Association of Universities (IAU)<sup>23</sup> launched the IAU Higher Education and Research for Sustainable Development (HESD) Cluster. This initiative aims to promote the role of higher education institutions in building more sustainable societies.

The Cluster brings together IAU Member universities to work collaboratively on developing existing and designing new initiatives aiming at addressing the SDGs. 16 groups of universities have been established to work on each of the SDGs 1-16. Each group has an institutional team leader (see the map below showing the location of each team leader), joined by a group of Satellite Universities from the five continents. IAU itself leads the work on SDG 17 (Partnerships for the goals). The group team leaders come from a wide variety of countries and continents and so do the partner universities in each group. This results in very constructive and dynamic partnerships set up around each of the 17 SDGs.



The main objectives of the Cluster are to:

- Advocate for the key role higher education plays in achieving the SDGs and the UN Sustainable Development Agenda 2030
- Foster a holistic and transformative approach to sustainable development at universities and other higher education institutions
- Bring together universities from around the world on an equal footing and create meeting points with policy makers

Each group on the Cluster brings together universities that have expertise on the relevant SDG. The Cluster encourages a holistic approach to the SDGs, promoting the whole institution approach, where institutions aim to embed sustainable development in their strategic planning, academic and organisational work. By bringing a diverse pool of partners to work collaboratively and internationally, the Cluster achieves a significant outreach globally.

The activities of the groups in the Cluster include the following:

- Developing recommendations to inform decision-making at institutions and the policy level
- Acting as a resource of best practice to translate and advance the SDGs in local, national and international contexts
- Fostering peer-to-peer learning, collaboration and exchange among universities and other stakeholders

The added value of the Cluster lies in the networking opportunities and the sharing of knowledge, exchange of good practice, and visibility at the local and global levels. The Cluster allows universities to learn about the work that is being carried out elsewhere on topics of shared interest.

Link to HESD Portal and Cluster webpage: <https://www.iau-hesd.net/contenu/4648-iau-global-cluster-hesd.html>.

Source: Technopolis, based on information from the official website <https://www.iau-aiu.net/HESD?onglet=1> and on interviews with IAU.

23. The official website available at: <https://www.iau-aiu.net/>

Figure 44 illustrates another example of a partnership platform which focuses on supporting broader partnerships composed of diverse types of

organisations, including private sector organisations and foundations.

**Figure 44** - United Nations Office for Partnerships

The United Nations Office for Partnerships seeks to be the trusted platform for partners to connect and create opportunities and solutions to reach the SDGs. The Office works globally, nationally and regionally to transform the world through SDG partnerships. It serves as a gateway for partnership building between the private sector, foundations and other non-state actors and the United Nations system in furtherance of the SDGs.

In this role, the Office has four primary functions:

- To serve as the operational interface between the United Nations Foundation and the United Nations system in support of high-impact projects implemented throughout the world by UN system agencies
- To provide administrative support to the United Nations Democracy Fund
- To advise, guide and facilitate partnership events and initiatives between the United Nations and non-state actors, such as private sector, foundation and civil society, in support of the SDGs
- To serve as the Secretariat for the Secretary-General's SDG Advocates and the SDG Strategy Hub

Source: <https://www.un.org/partnerships/>

### Building on the success on international higher education partnerships

The study has demonstrated that higher education partnerships contribute significantly to a variety of sustainable development challenges, and to the SDGs. They generate benefits for partner organisations themselves (and their staff and students when higher education institutions are involved in the partnership), their communities, wider stakeholders, but also for other organisations not involved in the partnership. Furthermore, successful partnerships contribute to meeting the funders' strategic objectives in the international development area.

International higher education partnerships are an effective way of bringing together partners from the Global South and from the Global North around common objectives and goals. Although challenges persist, such as around the equity (see Section 3.2), new partnerships (externally and internally funded) emerge to tackle the SDGs.

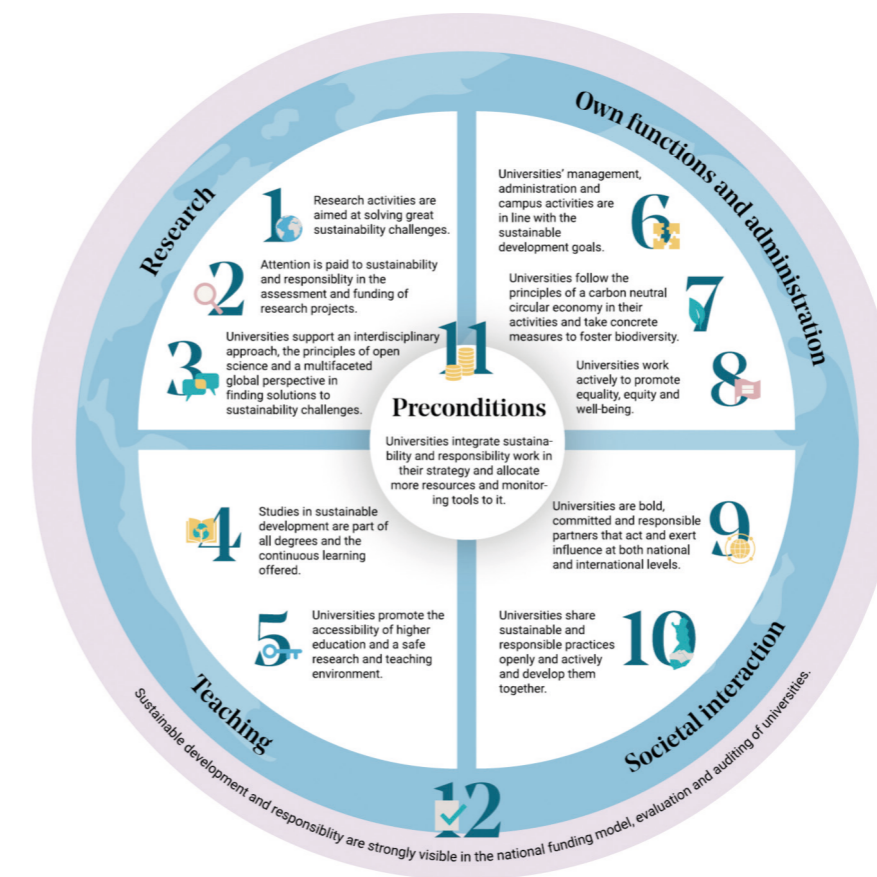
The evidence (case studies, interviews and literature) shows that higher education institutions involved in successful partnerships are often those that also adopted reforms of their institutional policies and strategies, allowing them to become more open, internationalised and to integrate the sustainable development agenda in their institutions. Whilst there is no one-size-fits-all approach, higher education institutions can start by mapping their current activities in teaching, learning, research and community engagement against the SDGs, assess the alignment with the national priorities and with priorities at their local level. This will help them identify where the gaps are, which could then be addressed by partnering with other organisations with the necessary skills and expertise, and jointly apply for funding.

We have identified several recent initiatives providing guidance to higher education institutions for integrating the sustainable development agenda in their policies and strategies. Figure 45 provides a summary of the latest work of Universities Finland around the SDGs.

**Figure 45** - Theses on sustainable development and responsibility by Universities Finland

In February 2019, Universities Finland set up a national working group on sustainable development and responsibility to enhance the universities' sustainability work. The group brings together 14 universities and the National Union of University Students in Finland to define the universities' shared principles, objectives and forms of operation for the promotion of sustainable development and responsibility during 2019 and 2020. The setting of the objectives is governed by the SDGs, Society's Commitment (Sitoumus2050) and the Paris Agreement, among others.

The working group framed the discussion with a set of 12 theses that should guide each higher education institutions in their work around the sustainable development.



Source: Universities Finland (2020) *Theses on sustainable development and responsibility*.

As designing new institutional strategies and policies takes time, there are yet not many examples of how institutions integrate the SDGs internally. York University in Canada is one of those institutions who have already done this. In its Academic Plan 2020 – 2025,<sup>24</sup> the university made a commitment to “deepen collective contributions to the United Nations’ seventeen Sustainable Development Goals”. The University of Regina (Canada) made a similar commitment in its 2020-2025 Strategic Plan<sup>25</sup> by linking their areas of strategic focus to each of the 17 SDGs with aim of achieving the contribution by 2025.

It transpired clearly from interviews with stakeholders that higher education institutions in the Global South will face more challenges in their effort to embrace the SDGs within their organisations. However, international higher education partnerships can act as a leverage in this effort. In such partnerships higher education institutions (and researchers) can be joined by governments (and civil servants) and industry around common objectives of achieving actionable knowledge, offering local solutions, raising funds from multiples sources, producing social innovations and taking collective actions.<sup>26</sup>

<sup>24</sup> Available online at: <https://vpap.info.yorku.ca/files/2020/06/Building-a-Better-Future-YorkU-UAP-2020-2025.pdf>

<sup>25</sup> Available online at: <https://www.uregina.ca/strategic-plan/assets/docs/pdf/uofr-2020-2025-strategic-plan.pdf>

<sup>26</sup> Ligami, C. (2021) Targets and indicators necessary to track progress on SDGs In University World News, available online at: <https://www.universityworldnews.com/post.php?story=20210519185517949> [accessed on 30/06/2021]



# 4. Implications



There are several key implications from this study both for higher education institutions in the UK and for funding bodies in the UK.

## 4.1. Implications for funders

- **Designing programmes which embed the SDGs.** Although it is expected that donors and funders will increasingly reference the need to link the objectives of their funded portfolios to the SDGs, this is not something that is likely to happen automatically. It will require actions on the side of the funders, 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 exercise over the funded partnerships. This can be used to influence partnerships' decisions around monitoring and evaluation so that these are more closely linked to the SDGs. At the same time, funders can support their funded portfolios 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.** Although there is a growing involvement of Southern partners in choosing the priorities and activities for the partnerships, more emphasis from funders is still necessary in order to improve this aspect of equity. Lack of capacity in some Southern partners often limits their ability to perform a major role in agenda setting. Funders can support this 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.** Equity in partnerships remains a multi-faceted issue. Funders can provide their invaluable experience with supporting North-South partnerships and further exploring what an "equitable partnership"

looks like in different contexts. It is, however, likely that 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.** Evidence shows that longer-term partnerships tend to be more equitable than those supported for shorter periods of time. 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 about what research has already been conducted.** In order to mitigate the risk of duplicities, funders can further explore how building and supporting partnership platforms bringing partnerships from different programmes and/or from different funders together to share good practice and results can help mitigate the risk of overlaps and help better focus the resources. The Donor Harmonisation Group, in this respect, provides opportunities to share the results of research into outcomes and impact of international higher education partnerships more globally
- **Recognising the long-term consequences of the Covid-19 pandemic.** Although the full account of the longer-term impact of the Covid-19 pandemic on international higher education partnerships is yet to be seen, there are already signs suggesting that fewer opportunities to meet in person may lead to fewer new partnerships being established in the future. Funders can provide further support to potential partners by organising networking events, workshops and by increasing visibility of funding opportunities locally so that new actors (e.g. Southern higher education institutions currently not involved in international partnerships) can form partnerships more easily in the future

## 4.2. Implications for higher education institutions in the UK

- **Considering the equity in benefits stemming from international higher education partnerships.** Evidence shows that risks of unequal benefits are not negligible, in particular in relation to research partnerships and academic publishing. Northern partners (including higher education institutions 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.** Partnerships are only viable if they bring tangible benefits to all partners. Evidence shows that although benefits for partners from the Global North are less well defined and articulated, this does not mean that they do not exist. Higher

education institutions in the Global North (including in the UK) can, therefore, put more effort on identifying expected benefits for their own institutions, academics, students, as well as for their stakeholders and communities. This will help to better showcase the added value of participation of UK higher education institutions in these partnerships, as well as justify both monetary and non-monetary costs

- **Exploring how successful participation in international higher education partnerships can be built upon further.** Higher education institutions in the UK can capitalise on their long-term experience with North-South partnerships in their effort to integrate the sustainable development agenda 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 (e.g. by Universities of Finland, universities in Canada etc)



# Appendix A

## Full case studies

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Supplied in a separate document.



# Appendix B

## Analysis of the partnership mapping



### B.1. Introduction

This annex presents the results of the analysis of the mapping of international higher education partnerships conducted in the framework of the study “Role of international higher education partnerships in contributing to the sustainable development goals” for the British Council and Association of Commonwealth Universities.

By means of desk research, the study team mapped the landscape of international higher education partnerships. The main aim of the mapping was to better understand the current state of play; how the existing partnerships (but also the recently finished ones) operate in terms of their activities (e.g. curricular reform, teacher training, joint study programmes; joint research projects etc.), their governance models and the division of responsibility among partners; how they contribute to SDGs; indication of success and impact; and other characteristics (e.g. funders, geography, budget, duration etc.).

We extracted the partnerships included in the literature and those already in the study consortium’s collective knowledge. In addition, we performed an additional targeted search, using a set of key words with a view to identify and map additional partnerships. The mapping exercise did not aim at providing a comprehensive list of all relevant international higher education partnerships globally, because this would not be feasible. Instead, the mapping aimed at capturing the diversity of the partnership landscape and at making sure that partnerships with different attributes are represented in the mapping.

The identification of partnerships started with exploration of funding programmes and portfolios of the main funders (the final list included over 40 funders and branches of larger funders, public, private and non-profit organisations). The aim here was to map in detail at least three partnerships from each funding programme of each funder. This was then complemented by additional literature and online search for additional partnerships.

For the mapping, we used a bespoke mapping tool which we developed during the inception stage, which guided the individual researchers and allowed them to focus their effort on the relevant type of information. All partnerships were mapped in a harmonised way, which facilitated the analysis of the information. Upon the completion of the mapping, the core study team ran a check for completeness of the data. The output of the mapping was used for the analysis in this final report. The mapping exercise also served to identify good candidates for the in-depth case studies of partnerships. For this purpose, we identified contacts for each partnership and assessed the availability of obtaining more detailed data for the case study via further research or interview.

In line with the scope of the overarching study, each partnership had to fulfil the following criteria in order to be eligible for the mapping:

- Real partnership (the intervention has to be a real partnership, i.e. more than one partner organisation come together to partner around the same objectives and goals)
- At least one partner organisation comes from the Global South (i.e. North-North partnerships are excluded)
- At least one partner organisation is a higher education institution. It can partner with other higher education organisations, or any other type of organisation

In total, we 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 results are presented in the following sections.

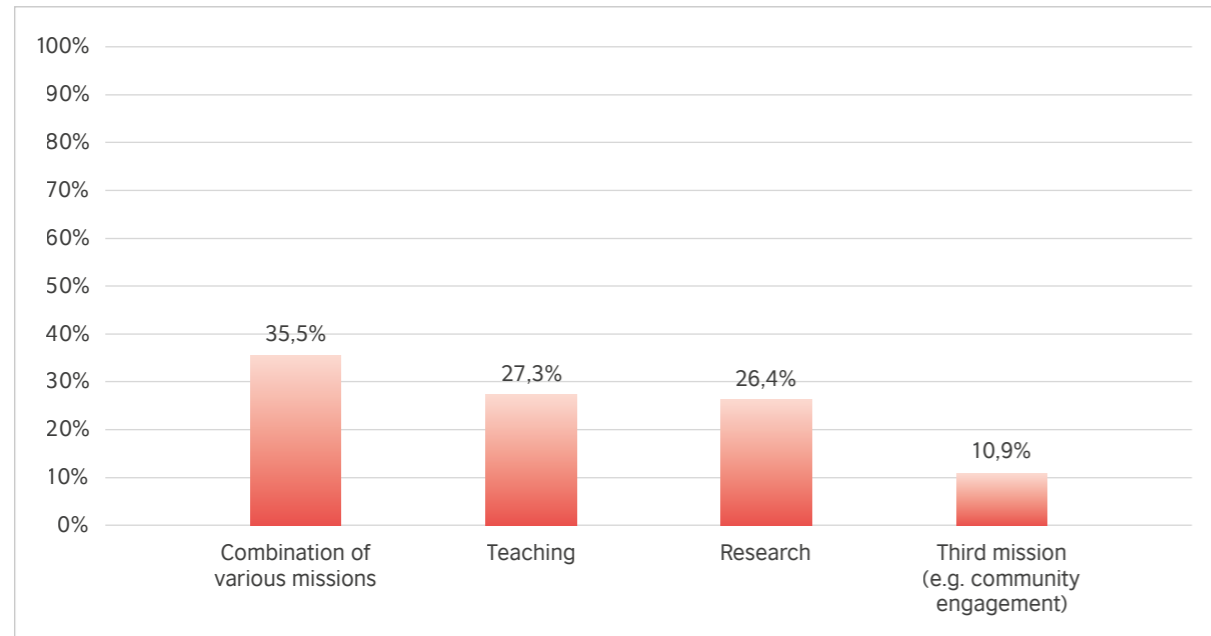


## B.2. Mission of the partnerships and partner organisations

Although we identified a large number of partnerships which either focused on teaching and learning, on research, or on the third mission, the highest number of those combined two or more of

the three missions. The third mission was seen more rarely than teaching and learning and research. (Figure 46)

Figure 46 - Main mission of the partnerships

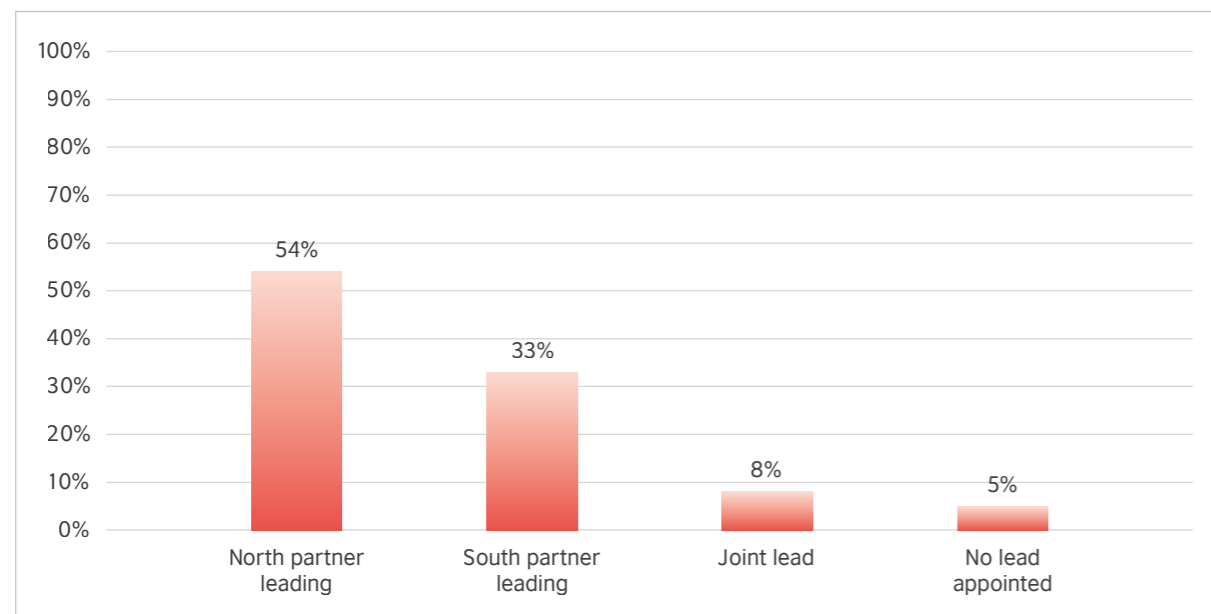


Source: Technopolis and KCL (n=110)

In terms of leadership and sharing of responsibility, the distribution shows a clear tendency to appoint a single lead partner among the partnerships, with Northern partners leading in more than half of the partnerships. South partners were appointed

leaders in just over a third of the identified partnerships. Jointly led partnerships, and partnerships without a clearly defined leader were identified considerably less frequently. (Figure 47)

Figure 47 - Sharing of responsibility

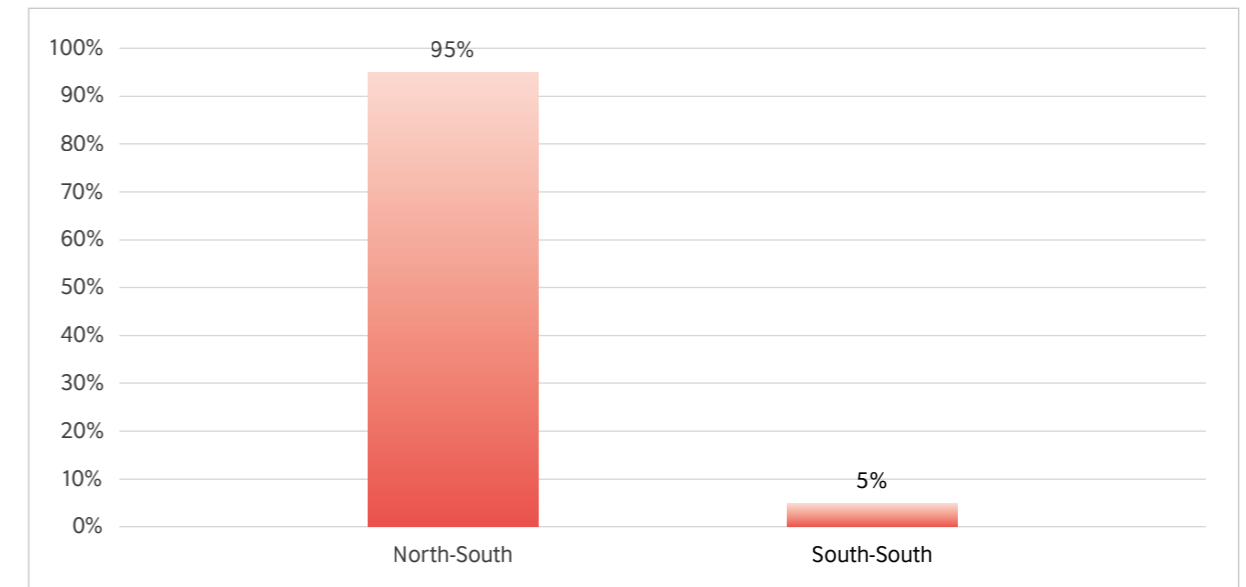


Source: Technopolis and KCL (n=110)

Figure 48 shows that an overwhelming majority of the mapped partnerships involved at least one Northern partner (95%). Taking into account the previous figure, this also means that we found a

considerable number of partnerships where a South partner was in the lead, with a North partner taking another a role of a team member.

Figure 48 - North-South vs South-South partnerships



Source: Technopolis and KCL (n=110)

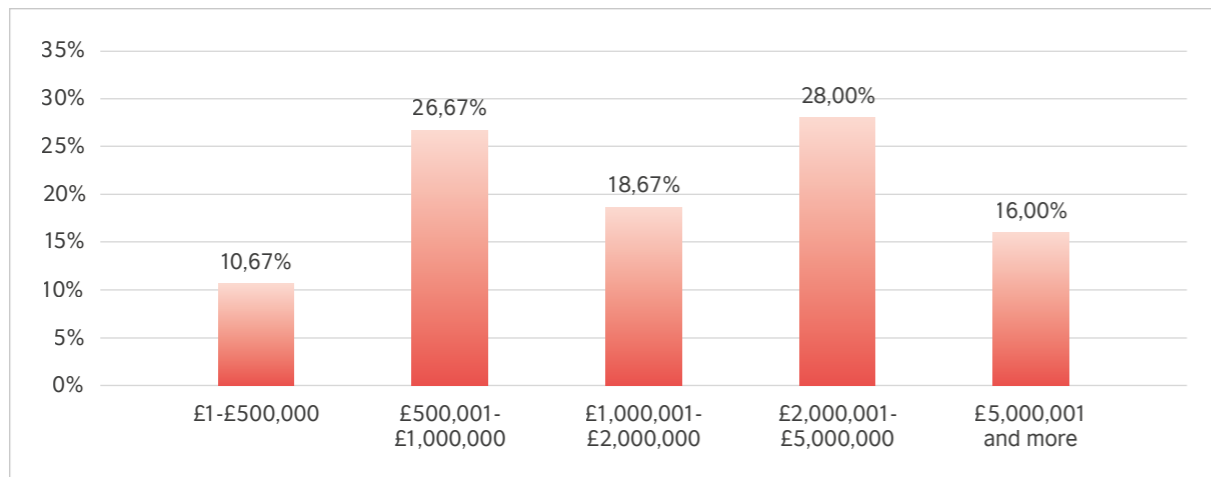
### B.3. Funding of the partnerships

The budgets of the mapped partnerships demonstrated a high degree of variability. In our mapping, budgets of the partnerships ranged from £119,068 (a partnership funded by IDRC, Canada) to £869,898,000 (MasterCard Foundation Scholar Program), with the mean budget of £1,764,440.<sup>27</sup>

Figure 34 plots the distribution of the partnerships into budget brackets. Exactly 28% of the partnerships had a budget between £2 million and £5 million, closely followed by partnerships with

budgets between £500 thousand and £1 million. This means that 84% of all mapped partnerships had budgets smaller than £5 million. It is important to note that the sample of the mapped partnerships is not representative of the global population of higher education partnerships although a high number of the flagship funding schemes of the major international aid donors were included in the mapping.

**Figure 49** - Distribution of partnerships by budget



Source: Technopolis and KCL (n=75)

The budget variety also shows in the vast difference between the mean (£17 million) and median (£15 million) budgets, as well as the differences in standard deviations if the largest budget is removed

(which equals to approx. £100 million with the MasterCard Foundation Scholar Programme included and £15 million when this partnership is removed).

**Figure 50** - Basic descriptive statistics of the budgets of the identified partnerships

Mean budget	Standard deviation	Standard deviation without MasterCard Foundation Scholar Programme budget	Median budget
£17,098,116	£99,954,969.76	£15,021,942.11	£1,500,000

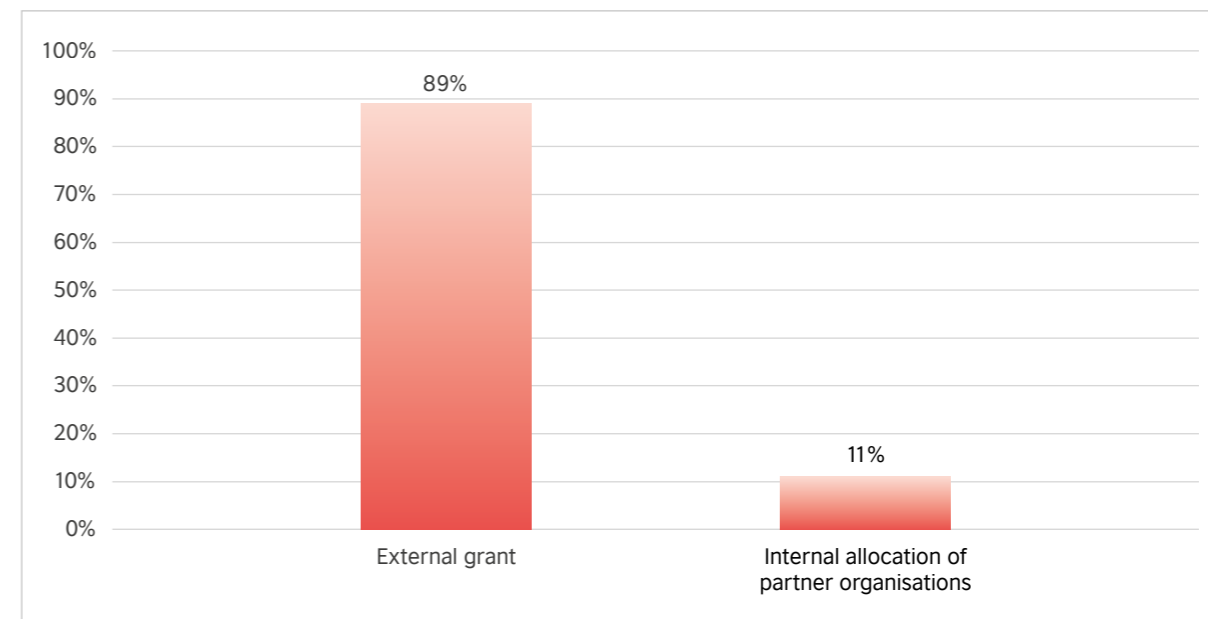
Source: Technopolis and KCL (n=75)

<sup>27</sup> The arithmetic average is £15,061,894.15. However, this is skewed by a small number of partnerships which are outliers in the sense that their budgets are very large.

Partnerships were funded mainly by an external agency, as opposed to other forms of funding (89%). In 11% of the mapped cases, the funds were raised

internally among the partner organisations. (Figure 51)

**Figure 51** - Funding type

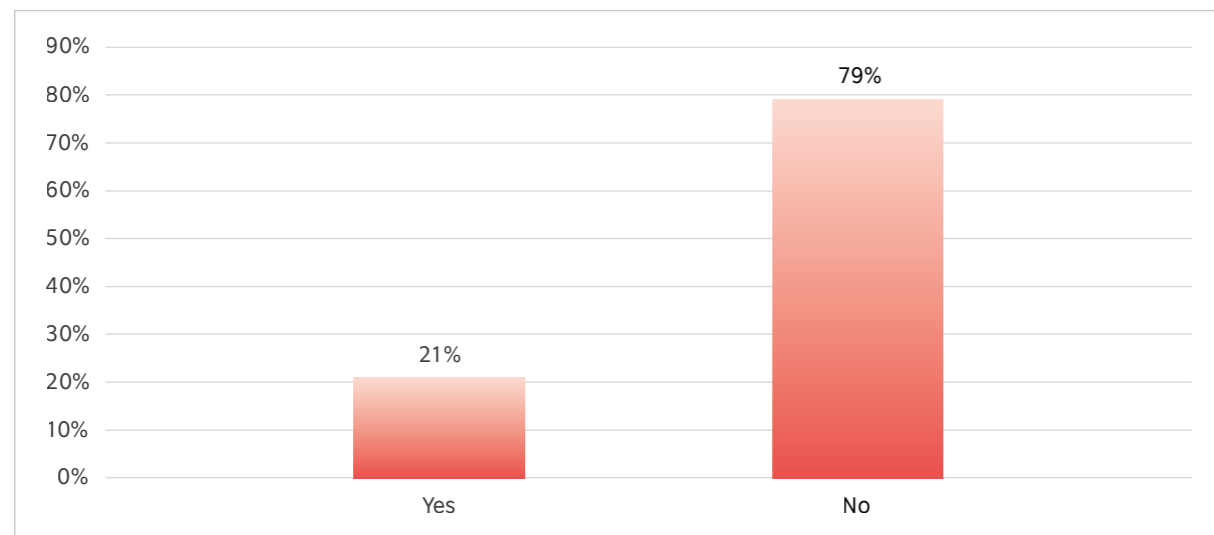


Source: Technopolis and KCL (n=103)

## B.4. Linkages to the SDGs

More than three quarters of the partnerships did not state attaining SDGs as an aim. It needs to be noted, however, that only explicit mentions of the SDGs in the partnership objectives were considered.

**Figure 52** - Is contribution to the SDGs explicitly mentioned as a goal / objective?

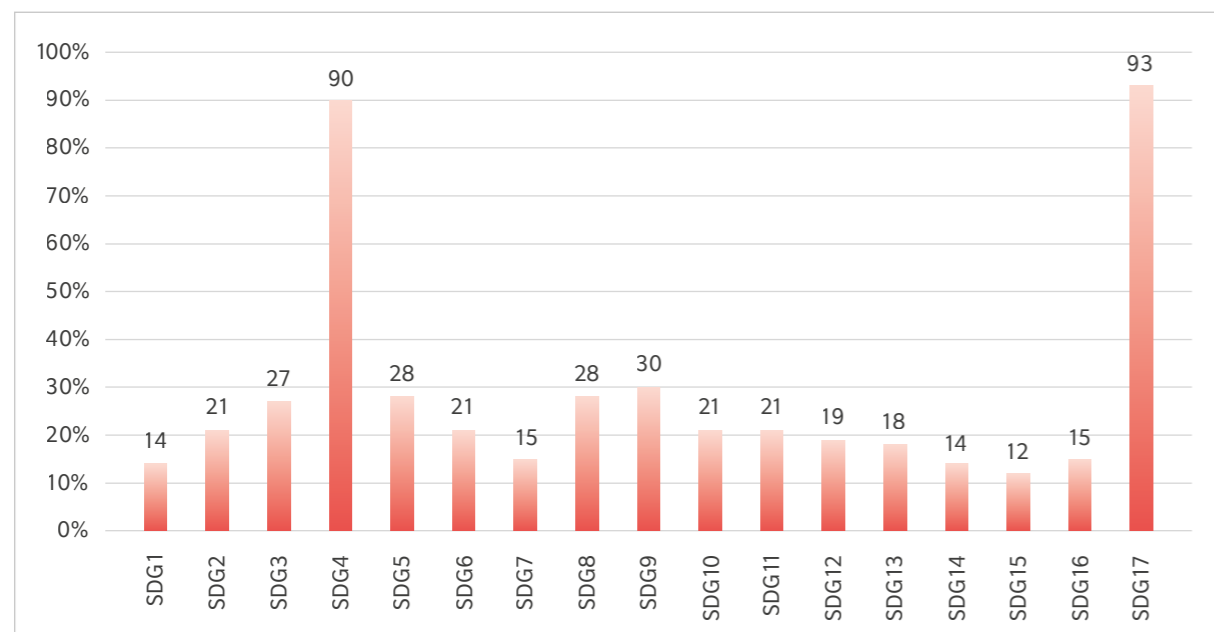


Source: Technopolis and KCL (n=110)

Among the 110 partnerships that we mapped and analysed, there is a good diversity of the SDGs, and there are observable links to all 17 SDGs. This provides evidence that international higher education partnerships are relevant for all SDGs, although SDG4 (quality education) and SDG17 (partnerships for the goals) come out more strongly

than others. This could be explained by the fact that we were mapping only those international partnerships which included at least one higher education institution in a partner role. There are eight other SDGs which are addressed by more than 20 of the mapped partnerships (SDG2, SDG3, SDG5, SDG6, SDG8, SDG9, SDG10, SDG11).<sup>28</sup>

**Figure 53** - SDGs addressed among the mapped partnerships



Source: Technopolis and KCL; note: n=110; one partnership can contribute to multiple SDGs, therefore the sum do not add up to 110.







<sup>28</sup> The set of case studies provides a more detailed insight into the specific outcomes and mechanisms through which the partnerships contribute to the SDGs.

Although each partnership designs and implements their own activities, resulting in distinct outputs and outcomes, there are trends observable across the mapped portfolio of international higher education

partnerships. The following table provides a summary of outcomes through which the mapped partnerships contribute to the SDGs.

**Figure 54** - Overview of specific outcomes through which the partnerships contribute to the SDGs (based on the mapping of partnerships)

SDGs		How partnerships contribute
	No poverty	Enabling access to education for those who do not have the sufficient resources for it.
	Zero hunger	Food insecurity is addressed through research on agri-food, nutrition and sustainable consumption.
	Good health and well-being	The partnerships generally target specific health challenges relevant to their partner countries, such as human papilloma virus, tuberculosis and malaria. Innovative capacity-building in research and practise as well as scaling up access to services are common goals. Specific activities and outputs include an international information sharing platform, awareness-raising campaign and rapid field tests for tuberculosis.
	Quality education	An overwhelming majority of the mapped partnerships include activities relevant to higher education (therefore to SDG4). Common specific themes include developing curriculum and PhD training as well as improving facilities in partner universities. Transforming higher education so that it becomes more accessible is also a common goal in the HEI-focused innovations. Another overarching theme has been aligning the academic goals to address the issues of local communities. Provision of scholarships to student and support for academic and student mobility can also be included here as another way how international higher education partnerships contribute to the SDG4.
	Gender equality	The ways in which the mapped projects contribute to the SDG5 is largely two-fold. Most of the partnerships feature efforts to enhance women's' position in academia by enabling more women to access higher education (often in STEM disciplines) and gender responsive pedagogy. The other initiatives focus on issues such as feminine health care and sexual violence in target communities.
	Clean water and sanitation	Although this is not a major focus of international higher education partnerships studies, those identified aim for example at dam building, ecosystem management and the development of sustainable and equitable water use.
	Affordable and clean energy	The partnerships contributing to the SDG7 seek to integrate renewable energy themes in education, practices and infrastructures and training engineering lecturers in higher education institutions.

SDGs		How partnerships contribute
	Decent work and economic growth	Relevant partnerships feature HEI-industry collaboration and learning transferable skills for industry at higher education institutions. Other partnerships target private sector through working conditions and equal pay as well as economic policies.
	Industry, innovation and infrastructure	The partnerships contributing to the SDG9 generally aim to positively affect the local industry and capacities. This tends to happen through innovation in production, logistics, and locally relevant agricultural solutions.
	Reduced inequalities	Gender equality in academia and outside academia is addressed among the partnerships (see SDG5). In addition, the partnerships aim at making higher education and labour markets more accessible through financial support and capacity building. Moreover, some partnerships address the inequality of the labour markets as a whole through research.
	Sustainable cities and communities	The partnerships focus on integrating socially impactful transferable skills, heightened community outreach and collaboration at HEIs producing solutions to local challenges, such as the production of heritage products.
	Responsible consumption and production	The responsible consumption and production goal is contributed to mainly through innovations in agricultural and environmental projects and by following established sustainable production principles.
	Climate action	The relevant partnerships focus largely on research and policies around issues impacting climate change. These involve developing pathways to sustainable greenhouse gas emissions, researching atmospheric methane and contributing to the development of climate change policies.
	Life below water	Partnerships' outcomes contributing to life below water consist mostly of research and more indirect action, such as strengthening HEI networks on environment and sustainability.
	Life on land	The relatively least addressed goal in the mapped portfolio of partnerships is contributed to in a few research initiatives (e.g. life sciences approach on ecosystems among other activities). Overall, we saw few direct activities addressing life on land.

Source: Technopolis

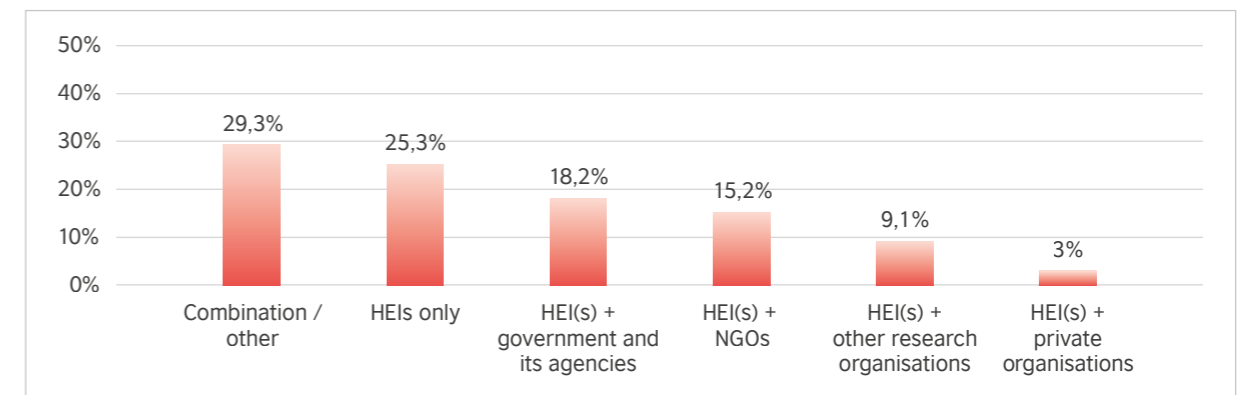
## B.5. Types of partner organisations involved in the partnerships

In our mapping, we have identified a large number of combinations of the above attributes in existing partnerships, although some attributes tend to prevail. This is an example of external grants which are more common than internal fund-raising. Similarly, we have seen more North-led partnership than those with a Global South partner in the lead.

Figure 24 provides an overview of the distribution of the types of partner organisations involved in the partnerships that we mapped (approximately 100

partnerships). Higher education institutions are the only type of organisations involved in approximately one quarter of the partnerships. Almost one fifth of the partnerships is composed of higher education institutions and government bodies, whilst in 15% of the mapped partnerships, higher education institutions partner with NGOs. However, in almost one third of cases, the partner organisations combine other, often more than two, types.

Figure 55 - Types of partner organisations involved



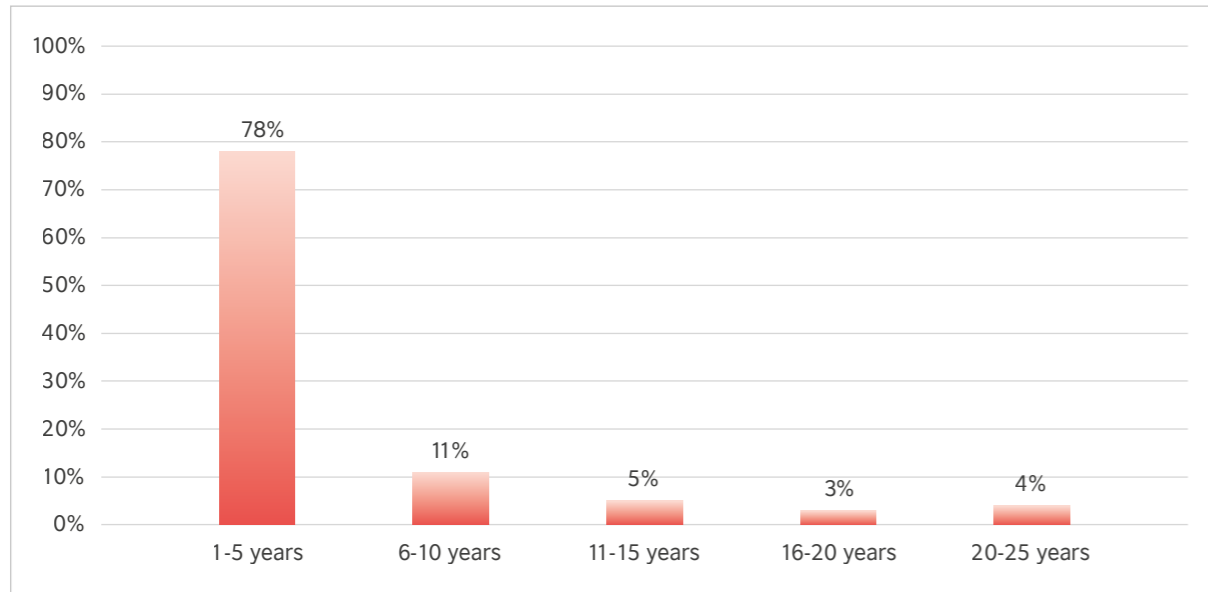
Source: Technopolis and KCL (n=99)

## B.6. Duration of the partnerships

The mapped partnerships run between 1997 and today (with 40 partnerships not complete). It is, however, clear that the vast majority of the partnerships (78%) have lasted between one and

five years with the following duration of six to ten years being slightly more common (11%) than the longer partnerships (between 3% and 5%). (Figure 56)

Figure 56 - Duration of the partnerships



Source: Technopolis and KCL (n=100)

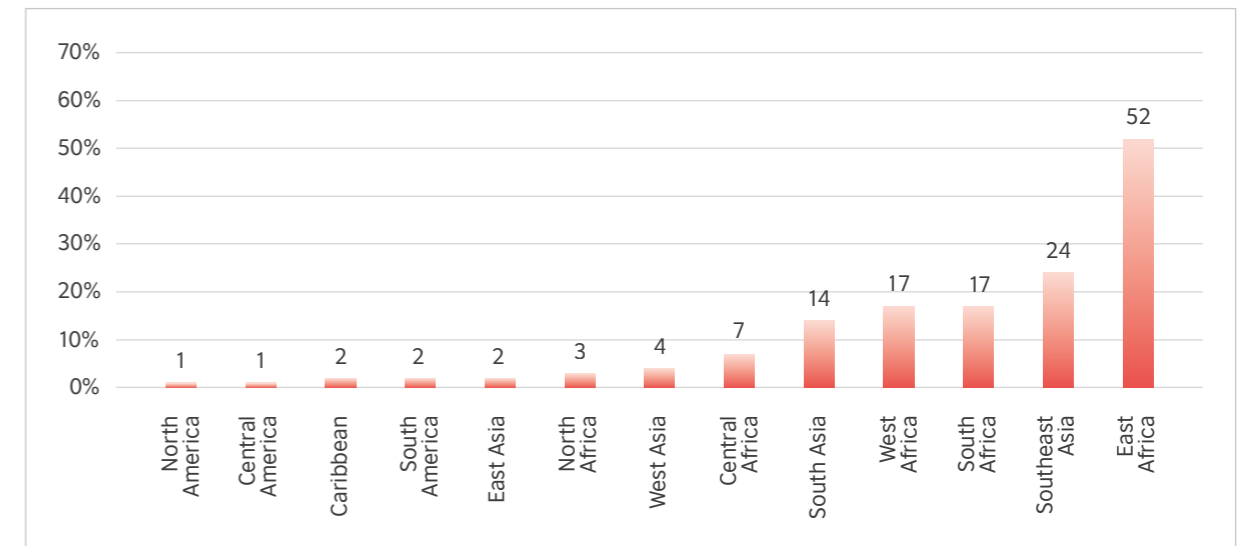
## B.7. Representation of the global regions

In terms of the global regions represented in the mapped partnerships, there is a good diversity across the board.

Among the partners from the Global South, East Africa was the most frequent region of origin, followed by other African regions. In addition to

African regions, the partners from the Global South came most often from South and Southeast Asian regions. Among the mapped partnerships, some partners were also from Latin America, but those were very few by comparison.

Figure 57 - Representation of global regions among the partners from the Global South

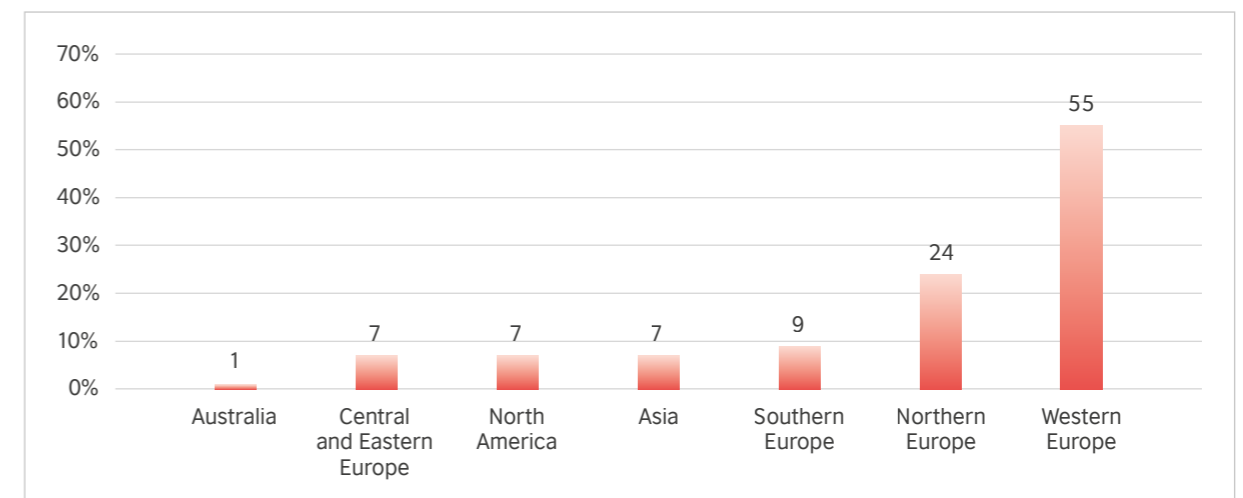


Source: Technopolis and KCL

For the purposes of this study, Australia is considered a partner from the Global North despite its geographic location. The distribution of Northern presence showed that most of the Northern

partners came from Western and Northern Europe. Southern Europe, Asia, North America and Central and Eastern European regions, in turn, were present seven to nine times across the 110 partnerships.

Figure 58 - Representation of global regions among the partners from the North South



Source: Technopolis and KCL



# Appendix C

## List of interviewees



Name	Affiliation
Anetta Caplanova	University of Economics in Bratislava, Slovakia
Ann Penny	James Cook University Australia
Annelien Gansemans & Steven Schoofs	VLI-RUOS, Belgium
Beatrice Mkenda	University of Dar es Salaam
Budd Hall	Knowledge for Change (K4C), Canada
Emilia Molnar	Sida, Sweden
Emmanuel Abbey	Network of universities in the global south – ARUA, Ghana
Fiorella Perotto	European Commission, Directorate-General Education and Culture, Erasmus+ Coordination (EAC.B.4), Belgium
Ganga Gautam	Tribhuvan University, Nepal
Graham Burns	JAMK University of Applied Sciences Jyväskylä, Finland
Huma Masood & Manish Joshi	UNESCO India
Isabel Toman	International Association of Universities, France
Ishtiaq Jamil	University of Bergen, Norway
James Jowi	African Network for Internationalization of Education (ANIE), Kenya
Jon Jenkins	ACU, UK
Juliette Eulderink & Lindsey Schwidder	TU Delft Valorisation Centre, Netherlands
Justine Namaalwa	Makerere University, Uganda
Karoline Garbaliuskaite & Stephan Wynants	EACEA (agency of the European Commission), Belgium
Khoa V. L. Thi	Hanoi University of Natural Resources and Environment, Vietnam
Lars Arne Jensen	DANIDA, Denmark

Name	Affiliation
Mayunga Kashilimu	Dodoma Water and Sanitation Authority, Tanzania
Michael Horig & Ursula Paintner	DAAD, Germany
Monika Berge	Karolinska Institutet, Sweden
Pajala Kaija & Hämäläinen Anne	Edufi, Finland
Pham Quy Nhan	Hanoi University of Natural Resources and Environment, Vietnam
Rabea Malik	IDEAS Pakistan
Richard Taylor	UCL, UK
Rosmini Omar	Universiti Teknologi Malaysia
Ruth Kelman	NERC, UK
Shona Bezanson	Mastercard Foundation Scholars Program, Rwanda
Prof. Sibusiso Moyo	Durban University of Technology, South Africa
Therese Rantakokko	Uppsala University, Sweden
Tom Kimani	AERC, UK
Tonya Blowers	Organisation for Women in Science for the Developing World (OWSD), Italy
Vibeke Sorum	NORAD (Nepal, Bangladesh & Sri Lanka), Norway



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