An analysis of international partnership programs: The case of an historically disadvantaged institution in South Africa

BARBARA M. TEDROW1,* & REITUMETSE OBAKENG MABOKELA2,*

1 Department of Education, Agnes Scott College, 141 East College Ave. Decatur/Atlanta, GA, 30002, USA; 2 Department of Educational Administration, 425, Erickson Hall, Michigan State University, East Lansing, MI 48824, USA. (*authors for correspondence, Phone: (404) 299-3016; e-mail: btedrow@agnesscott.edu; Phone: (517) 353-6676; Fax: (517) 353-6393; e-mail: mabokela@msu.edu)

Abstract. International academic partnerships have the potential to enhance the participating institution’s efforts to become actors in the global educational arena. The ability of partnerships to realize their objectives is affected by the relationship that the partner members have with one another and the mutual benefit each receives from the agreement. This article examines the dynamics of an academic partnership between Transformed University an historically disadvantaged institution in the Eastern Cape Province in South Africa and three international partners from the US, Canada, and the European Economic Community. The paper illuminates a variety of factors including history, organizational culture, and globalization forces that affect the success of academic partnerships to reach their stated objectives.

Keywords: higher education, international partnerships

Introduction

Since 1994, South Africa has engaged in educational reform and curriculum transformation to remedy years of economic, political, cultural, and social isolationist policies. These reform policies are proving to be a dull instrument in the practice of change at historically disadvantaged institutions (HDI’s) who are engaged in numerous international partnerships intended to support the reform processes. The changes are important to HDI’s because they serve the most economically impoverished areas of South Africa, which have much to gain from successful educational reform. This article is an analysis of the relationship between three international partnership programs implemented to support South Africa’s higher education institutions during the transformation process, and an historically disadvantaged university, Transformed University. Within the context of this article, partnership (linkages), refers to a formally developed
relationships between institutions where the participating partners derive mutual benefit from the involvement.

The following three partnerships are the focus of this analysis: (1) a US Partnership: the Tertiary Education Linkage Program (TELP); (2) a European Economic Union partnership, Technical and Business Education Initiative in South Africa (TABEISA); and (3) a Canadian partnership entitled the Canadian College Partnership Program (CCPP). TELP’s purpose is to “increase access for black South Africans to tertiary education and its opportunities and resources, and to improve academic, administrative, and research capacity in historically disadvantaged tertiary education institutions”; (Academy for Education Development, Tertiary Education Linkages Project (TELP): mid-term evaluation report, 2000) The US project includes student development, curriculum develop, staff development, administrative and management development, and research. The European plan promotes entrepreneurial educational material development and projects to expand the growth of small business enterprises. The Canadian project seeks to create a business technology enterprise center as well as a small loan program so that people without capital or property can get financial backing to become small business owners. Partnership funding totals approximately $1,000,000 over a 5-year period.

Given that partnerships are being used as interventions to support educational reform and curriculum transformation to build a new multicultural democracy in an age of globalization, the questions we explore in this article are: (1) how are participants in international academic partnership prepared to deal with the complex dynamics of such relationships; (2) how can partnership standards reveal both outcome and attitude changes that are relevant to both institutions; and (3) how do South African and Northern partner participants learn to distinguish between the inherent tension to maintain what is and change, which is driven by South African government directives.

The answers to these questions are important and will contribute to the paucity of research that examines cross-national academic partnerships. Using a qualitative methods, the study on which this article is based examines data from 152 participants over 2-years who have been involved in international partnership activities and inter-group relations at Transformed University, an HDI in the Eastern Cape Province of South Africa. First, we investigate the background of the Eastern Cape through a historical, social, cultural, and political lens to understand how it shapes organizational and inter-group relations. Second, we lay out theoretical assumptions regarding partnerships and their place in