Double Agendas in International Partnership Programs: A case study from an Ethiopian University

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ABSTRACT
This paper explores the policy discourses underpinning an international higher education partnership involving a large Ethiopian university. Particular attention is given to a partnership programme established between an Ethiopian (EU) and a Norwegian (NU) university, and the main ideas and practices expressed and negotiated from an Ethiopian perspective. This study employs a theoretical framework based on critical policy analysis and a qualitative case study design using interviews and document analysis. The results illustrate how a loosely defined policy for international partnership in higher education frames the conditions and possibilities for this programme. Partnership in EU is based on policies that emphasise flexibility in various possibilities, but also with ambitions, foremost, to partner with a Northern university. In the EU, this partnership is viewed, mainly, as a means of academic growth and development while also convoluted with concerns about resource dilemmas and dependency. This partnership programme, therefore, appears to be based on contradictions from which a double agenda emerges: striving for mutuality versus avoiding dependency, and local needs versus global achievements.

Introduction
Higher education policies for internationalisation have become a common part of regulations and directives at most universities today. However, the impact of these policies varies across countries, institutions and cultures (DeWit & Altbach, 2021; Tight, 2021). In general, these kinds of policies tend to highlight the institutional importance of building strong and successful international networks to allow departments and researchers to build an international reputation, but also student mobility, which can lead to benefits for both academics and their universities. In tandem with this development, higher education partnerships between South (often referred to as developing countries) and North (developed countries) have become an ever-increasing trend (Stromquist, 2007; Teferra, 2014). Many partnership initiatives involving the Global South and North higher education institutions (HEIs) have also been established. Ethiopia has not been an exception; its HEIs have been engaged in partnerships...
with their Northern counterparts (Semela & Ayalew, 2008; Teferra, 2014). Norwegian universities are amongst the most longstanding partners of Ethiopian universities. Recently, funded by NORAD (Norwegian Agency for Development Cooperation), many universities in Ethiopia and Norway have been engaged in partnerships under the programme called NORHED (Norwegian Program for Capacity Building in Higher Education and Research for Development).

The importance of international partnerships is often referred to in policy directives for higher education in both the Southern and Northern parts of the world (see, e.g. EU Commission, 2019; New Partnership for Africa’s Development [NEPAD], 2001). These policy directives tend to emphasise the importance of partnerships for capacity building, improving quality, performance, broadening participation, and governance (EU Commission, 2019). The idea is that academic institutions benefit from global relationships, but with caution regarding their unintended consequences due to an inherent imbalance of resources between the Southern and Northern institutions. Being critical of the imbalance of power relations, many studies (e.g. Koehn & Obamba, 2014; Nossum, 2016; Samoff & Carrol, 2004; Stromquist, 2007) emphasise that partnerships between the Southern and the Northern institutions can be based on mutual relationships that go beyond external support and influence. Although this suggests a positive relationship, frequently this has not been the case, as the Southern institutions (often under resourced) hardly can do without this external support (Ishengoma, 2016). Others (Kot, 2015; Lizarraga, 2011; Wilson, 2012) emphasise the motives and priorities in understanding the nature of partnerships, arguing that partners’ motives and priorities tend to determine the partnership’s purposes, activities, and thereby its relationship dynamics. These motives are sometimes complex in that partnerships include striving for mutuality (Nossum, 2016; Samoff & Carrol, 2004) but also risks of dependency (Ishengoma, 2016; Stein, 2019). This complexity can be referred to as a kind of double agenda embedded in international partnerships.

In this study, “international higher education partnerships” refers to the formal agreement between different countries working collaboratively, and partnerships are understood to be based on a social agreement about mutuality. Accordingly, this study focuses on a partnership programme established for such activities as joint-research; collaborative teaching; curriculum development; conferences; and community engagement.

The study draws on policy theory to detect and analyse some of the main discourses expressed in the policy and practices of partnership programmes between HEIs in countries considered to be South and North. It focuses on the main discourses that emerge as the base for establishing these partnerships, the common traits, and for whom and why they emerge. As Francisconi, Grunder, and Mulloy (2011) argue: “Though many Ethiopian universities have engaged in partnerships … they are not as successful as they would like to be in building and sustaining the partnerships” (p. 10). One explanation for the lack of success could be linked to policy strategies, priorities, and rationales articulated to establish and shape the nature of the partnership. It is argued that partnerships that are established in consideration of the partners’ strategic priorities and rationales are likely to be sustained and successful (Sutton & Obst, 2011; Wanni, Hinz, & Day, 2010). However, aside from agency-sponsored evaluation reports and a few studies that focus on status (e.g. Francisconi et al.,
2011), little is known about the policy incentives and discourses behind the formation of international higher education partnerships in Ethiopia, and how these affect and shape the conditions and possibilities of a particular partnership programme.

The ambition here is to expand our understanding of the policy drives and factors associated with Ethiopian HEI’s prevailing motives for international partnerships, with a particular reference to an already established partnership between one selected university in Ethiopia (hereafter referred to as EU) and a Norwegian university (NU). This partnership programme (EU–NU) serves as a case in order to address the following questions:

1. What policies are forming a base at EU for establishing a partnership with NU?
2. What are the main discourses expressed in these policies and how are they forming this specific programme? and
3. Why is this partnership programme developed in this way?

The study has been conducted through analyses of policy and strategy documents and interview transcripts. Since most of the previous studies on North–South higher education partnerships have focused on issues related to the North (and western perspectives) (see Kot, 2015; Wilson, 2012), the intention here is to understand the underlying policy rationales for international partnership formation from the Southern perspective (using Ethiopia as an example). Thus, this study serves as a complement to the scarce contemporary research with regard to the Southern motives behind international partnerships, and can, from that perspective, also provide valuable insights for future partnership programmes between the global South and North.

**Theoretical frame**

Our general ambition is to engage in a theoretical discussion of the main policy discourses (Ball, 2012, 2016) or what we think of as “rationales” in higher education internationalisation (DeWit & Altbach, 2021; Knight, 2004). We see rationales as expressions of policy discourses that articulate strong ideas, stable discursive relationships, and social practices, either in text or as verbal discussions (Ball, 2012). These rationales are always expressions of regulations and aspects of legitimacy and power (Ball, 2012; Lizzarraga, 2011). They reflect and/or are part of policy statements or the main strategic objectives that institutions use or intend to achieve through, for example, internationalisation activities, including international partnerships (Chan, 2004; Jeptoo & Razia, 2012). Thus, we try to understand the rationales that are pushing HE stakeholders towards international partnerships, but also how these rationales are implemented in and affect practices.

According to DeWit and Altbach (2021) and Knight (2004), internationalisation activities are often driven by a dynamic combination of economic, academic, socio-cultural, and political rationales. Economic rationales are linked to demands for economic growth and competitiveness, labour market, and financial incentives (DeWit & Altbach, 2021; Knight, 2004; Tamrat & Teferra, 2018). With the growth of scientific and technological competitiveness, HEIs are pressurised to diversify their funding sources through international partnerships (Jeptoo & Razia, 2012; Woldegiyorgis, Proctor, &
DeWit, 2018) and to generate income through international activities, fee-paying international students, patenting, and franchise arrangements (Knight, 2004). Academic rationales are related to the aims and functions of higher education, including incorporating an international dimension to research and teaching, strengthening institutional capacity, improving institutional profile/status, enhancing quality, achieving international academic standards, and extension of academic horizon through various international academic and research activities (Jeptoo & Razia, 2012; Kot, 2015; Nyangau, 2018; Tamrat & Teferra, 2018). Socio-cultural rationales are related to improving intercultural understanding, national cultural identity, citizenship development, and social and community development (Knight, 2004; Nyangau, 2018; Qiang, 2003). It is also argued that political rationales are related to foreign policy, peace and national security, and national and regional identity (Jeptoo & Razia, 2012; Knight, 2004). For example, international academic activities are often seen as vehicles for improving diplomatic relations, national images, and geopolitical ties, and as a means of promoting the political systems (Ibid).

From this perspective, these rationales can explain why HEIs take part in internationalisation activities and guide the internationalisation process in which the institutions engage (Chan, 2004; Knight, 2004). Thus, this framework is necessary to highlight the intentions and main interests behind the engagement of the Ethiopian partner in an international partnership. Here, a focus is on the most apparent rationales that appear in a particular partnership programme, and to some extent on how they affect the practice.

**Empirical case and method**

The study employs a qualitative case study design (Creswell, 2014) to generate deeper insights into the contexts surrounding a particular case of international higher education partnership. One flagship Ethiopian university (EU) was selected as the exemplifying case (Bryman, 2012) – as other Ethiopian universities have taken it as a model and adopted its systems (Kassie, 2020). Moreover, its public affiliation, which often involves international partnerships (Samoff & Carrol, 2004), and its long-time engagement in partnerships with the Norwegian universities (Nossum, 2016), were used as criteria for selecting EU. Specifically, this partnership programme (hereafter EU–NU) was selected for its relatively long duration at the time of the study.

EU is the largest public university in Ethiopia. It was founded in 1950. At the time of partnership establishment (i.e. 2013), it had 10 colleges, 5 institutes, and 6 research institutes. It was running 70 undergraduate and 293 graduate programmes, 72 of which were PhD programmes. It had a student population of more than 51,500 and about 2833 academic staff. Of the total number of academic staff (researchers and teachers), 27.6% had a PhD.

The study is based on the analysis of relevant documents and semi-structured interviews with staff (administrators and academics) and PhD students at EU who have participated in the development of this partnership. The documents included government policies and strategies, institutional strategic plans, partnership proposals, and partnership agreements (see Appendix C). The interviews were conducted with a total of 24 participants. Administrators were selected purposefully. Academics and
PhD students were selected using a snowball sampling technique, in that first, we contacted the coordinator of the partnership programme, and then we requested him to propose additional academics and PhD students, who, in turn, helped us make contact with the participants. The focus of interviews with the administrators was mainly on policies, procedures, and arrangements employed in establishing and scrutinising the partnership programme. Interviews with academics focused on their experience in the partnership development and the main motives that drove them and their institution for establishing this programme. Interviews with PhD students focused on their expectations, benefits, and challenges in the programme. Even though we do not refer to all 24 participants in this paper, they have all been part of our analysis. An overview of the participants is presented in Table 1 below.

The data analysis process involved document analysis and analysis of interview data. Since we were looking for the main rationales expressed in this partnership programme (Ball, 2012; DeWit & Altbach, 2021; Knight, 2004), phrases and/or statements in the documents that signified a basis for the establishment of the partnership were highlighted and annotated (coded). Accordingly, clear intentions and interests, compelling factors and expectations declared repetitively in the documents were identified as themes. Then, these themes were compared with and clumped into major themes (see Appendix A). A similar procedure was followed in the analysis of interview transcripts. In this, we highlighted discourses that emerged as patterns among several participants. These repetitions were coded as themes. Then, these themes were compared with themes that emerged from the document analysis. Finally, the coded data from the document and interviews were integrated and analysed comparatively. Moreover, for identifying the dominant or priority discourses, the frequencies of each theme and major theme appear or denoted in the document were counted. This was also supplemented by responses to the rank ordering question in the interviews (see Appendix B).

### Table 1. Participants and their positions.

| Pseudonym | Positions                                                                 | Total participants |
|-----------|---------------------------------------------------------------------------|--------------------|
| Birara    | Administrative staff (director, dean, heads) who also participated as academic staff | 05                 |
| Ziad      | Administrative staff (director, dean, heads) who also participated as academic staff |                     |
| Desta     | Administrative staff (director, dean, heads) who also participated as academic staff |                     |
| Asnake    | Administrative staff (working as instructors, researchers, supervisors) | 10                 |
| Dargie    | Administrative staff (working as instructors, researchers, supervisors) |                     |
| Shume     | Administrative staff (working as instructors, researchers, supervisors) |                     |
| Fuad      | Administrative staff (working as instructors, researchers, supervisors) |                     |
| Bayessa   | Administrative staff (working as instructors, researchers, supervisors) |                     |
| Yegerem   | Administrative staff (working as instructors, researchers, supervisors) |                     |
| Andualem  | Administrative staff (working as instructors, researchers, supervisors) |                     |
| Awgichew  | Administrative staff (working as instructors, researchers, supervisors) |                     |
| Almaz     | Administrative staff (working as instructors, researchers, supervisors) |                     |
| Addis     | PhD students (who also participated as academic staff) | 09                 |
| Awol      | PhD students (who also participated as academic staff) |                     |
| Emebet    | PhD students (who also participated as academic staff) |                     |
| Getahun   | PhD students (who also participated as academic staff) |                     |
| Mahlet    | PhD students (who also participated as academic staff) |                     |
Double incentives in international partnerships

In general, the analysis of the selected governmental policy documents and strategic plans (see Appendix C) shows that the establishment and expansion of international partnerships in higher education in Ethiopia have, in recent years, been given due consideration. For example, the Second Growth and Transformation Plan (GTP II) document (FDRE, 2016) advocates strengthening the practice of international higher education partnership, and proposes to develop “a framework for national higher education international partnerships and collaboration” (p. 189). Also, in Science, Technology and Innovation Policy (Ministry of Science and Technology [MoST], 2012) such strategies are deemed to “strengthen [the]exchange of professionals and scientists through South-South and North-South cooperation initiatives; initiate joint-research with international partners” (p. 19).

These policy texts seem to advocate the need for strengthening international cooperation geared towards rapid technology transfer and innovation, and also stress expanding such collaborative activities as joint-research, joint training, expert assistance and searching for international partners for research funding. The Higher Education Proclamation (no. 650/2009) also calls for universities to conduct joint-research with national and international institutions, research centres, and industries. However, these policy documents and strategies lack detailed objectives and specific suggestions for strategies on how to establish and maintain international partnerships.

More emphasis and strategic focus on internationalisation and international partnership are given in the Fifth Education Sector Development Program (ESDP V, 2015–2020) (Ministry of Education [MOE], 2015). This programme document identifies “international collaboration/internationalisation” (p. 112) of higher education as one focal strategic area, describing detailed intentions about the development of the national framework for HEIs’ international partnerships in view of expanding international partnerships (ESDP V, 2015–2020). For example, it states that “collaborations between Ethiopian and international institutions will be extended so that international dialogue and exchange can advance the breadth and quality of academic programs and research … and enhance the effectiveness of teaching and learning” (p. 110). This governmental programme has also set out such specific targets such as increasing joint academic programmes and joint-research projects with international partners, research funds from international sources, and student mobility through international exchange programmes. It also dictates that each university ought to establish an International Liaison Office responsible for developing international partnership strategies and expanding international collaborations.

Consistent with these strategic intentions reflected in national policies, the case university (EU) has an office named: “Office of External Relations”, responsible for coordinating and supporting the formation of international partnerships. The university has also reflected its strategic interests in establishing and expanding international partnerships. For example, its Strategic Plan (2015/16–2020/21) addresses such intentions under its strategic issue and objectives (pp. 41–43). The plan highlights intentions to identify international partners on issues of common interest to exchange experience and jointly deliver training and community services. It further specifies the intention of
increasing the number of international partnership projects in research and training, exchange programmes, external funding, and international students.

The administrators participating in the study have also been involved in many of the discussions about working out institutional policies for international strategies. During the interviews, several of them underlined the value of internationalisation for the university as a whole, for departments, staff, and students. They also expressed the necessity of establishing more international partnerships. One administrator said:

Internationalization through international partnership is our university’s strategic interest. It advocates the establishment and enhancement of international linkages in research, training, exchange programs … so that our staff and students will have international exposure and improve international experience. (Ziad)

A similar description was made by another administrator who mentioned the need for incorporating international dimensions into the area of domestic education in order to develop staff and students’ competences that extend beyond the present reach. He said:

You know, we are living in an era of globalization that requires us to develop global thinking and competency. And, I think, our engagement in internationalization and international collaboration will contribute to improving our staff and students’ competency so as to properly respond to this. (Birara)

This shows that the university (EU) has a vivid strategic interest in international partnerships. Yet, it does not have a clear written policy and strategic priorities for establishing and managing these partnerships. In this regard, administrators expressed that setting priorities (geographic, thematic, type of partner) in policies would restrict their institution’s chance of collaborating with different partners in various fields. One administrator claimed that various partnership opportunities with:

… various institutions in a variety of themes are welcomed as far as they are related to the institution’s core missions. We prefer not to have a particular set of priorities for selecting partners as it may restrict our chance of partnering with various partners. (Birara)

It appears that EU follows a flexible and open approach to international partnership formation. Several of the administrators also highlighted that although the partnership projects were supposed to consider the institution’s research priority thematic areas, in practice this was not so rigid, as long as the proposed partnership projects obtained their running costs from external sources. As one administrator commented:

The institution has a research thematic area, which the projects need to consider. However, partnership projects which come with external funding opportunities are often welcomed. (Ziad)

Consequently, EU and its academic units often partner with the Northern institutions for they can likely secure such funding.

The EU–NU partnership programme was established in late 2013 between the linguistic departments at EU and NU. The programme was planned to run until 2018 (for 5 years), although it was extended to 2019 to complete delayed activities. It was funded by NORAD through a NORHED modality. Its major aim was to increase the knowledge and capacity in teaching and research at the local partner (EU) to develop resources for disadvantaged spoken and signed languages and to provide opportunities
for children who speak these languages to use them as a medium of instruction in their education. The programme also aimed to develop the competence of the staff at EU to do research in the area and to produce new language resources (orthographies, grammars, glossaries, etc.). To realise these aims, the programme included PhD education, MA curriculum design, joint-research activities, and community engagement.

As described above, the analysis of the partnership proposals and specific practices generated several themes connected to rationales on academic capacity, social development, and economic needs. We found that academic-related discourses were present most frequently (60 times) while those that we interpreted as connected to “social” issues were present least frequently (24 times) (see Appendix A). Consistent with the frequencies that recur in the documents, in response to the rank ordering question in the interview (Appendix B), all (24) participants ranked academic-related discourses as “first priority” in this partnership. Economic-related discourses were expressed about 49 times in the analysed documents and also ranked as “second priority” by most of the staff and students at EU.

A partnership for academic capacity

The policy analysis in the study revealed that some of the main intentions of the EU programme were to develop staff capacity for teaching, research, and service; enhancing research outputs; improving educational quality and standards; and acquiring international experience. Similarly, interests to improve academic capability, engage in joint-research and enhance research outputs, improve quality, and gain international exposure also emerged as important during the interviews.

For example, staff capacity building was most frequently cited (27 times) in the partnership proposal. Related to this, the proposal stated the expectation that the EU staff would acquire competences that enable them to develop language resources and standardise disadvantaged languages. The proposal further stated that EU has a shortage of qualified staff that can develop language resources: “orthographies, written language systems, structural and grammatical analyses” (p. 7). This was also frequently reflected during the interviews. One of the academic staff members commented:

Although Ethiopia is a multilingual nation and there is a national need for mother tongue education, it couldn’t be realized in many of the languages as they are under-researched and don’t have the necessary resources due to lack of skilled professionals. (Andualem)

Moreover, the shortage of “qualified staff” and the need for “staff and institutional capacity building” were mentioned by several staff and students. Thus, the need to address the scarcity of qualified staff appears to be one of the important factors that drive EU to establish this partnership.

However, the statements in both the documents and interviews also suggest that the status and capacity of the foreign partner (NU) is of high value for the capacity development of EU, which reflects a sign of dependency. It seems that NU is viewed to improve the knowledge and competence of the EU staff and students, as if a Northern partner, through its presence, would automatically contribute to positive
developments. For example, the proposal describes NU’s and its staff’s “strong linguistic profile … [and] excellent research competence” (p. 4) as one of the justifications for partnering with NU. Similarly, several academic staff (e.g. Asnake, Shume) also described the importance of working in a partnership with an institution having better expertise and status. Shume said:

… To build our staff’s capacity, we need better expertise … It is good that we are co-advising our PhD students with foreign professors. We are learning a lot from this. So we establish this partnership in order to get advantage of their better expertise and experience in the area. (Shume)

Shume described how NU per definition has better expertise and experience even though the contexts in EU and NU are very different.

Engagement in joint-research and enhancing research output has emerged as another academic-related motive. As the proposal underlines, the disadvantaged and sign languages in Ethiopia are poorly researched and need reforms and standardisation; thus, the formation of this partnership is also driven by the intention of addressing this problem. This supports research work that leads to research publication and the development of needed language resources. Likewise, all the academic staff expressed that their interest to involve in joint-research and improve their research capacity was one of the main rationales behind their engagement in this partnership. One of them further commented:

If you work in joint-research with them [NU staff], you may get a better chance for your work to get accepted for publication. This is because they are familiar with and closer to the system. (Dargie)

An opportunity to get exposure to international experience has also emerged as an academic-related motive. The proposal emphasises exposing PhD students and staff to an international academic environment through involving them in joint work with foreign staff, visits to foreign academic environments, and participation in conferences. This was mentioned as important by several of the staff and students.

Enhancing quality and international standards have also emerged as another driver of EU. Regarding this, the proposal emphasises enhancing “existing MA and PhD courses … and language technology” (p. 19); ensuring “relevance of programs and new graduates” (p. 15); and providing PhD students with the opportunity for their research to be inspected by international academics. Academics thought that international partnerships would bring about learning experiences valuable for improving the quality and standard of their institution. PhD students (e.g. Emebet, Getahun) also expressed their strong interest in pursuing their education in NU (which they described as a high quality and internationally standardised institution) and obtaining internationally recognised qualifications. From this, we can conclude that attaining international standards and recognition was one of the main ideas behind this partnership programme.
The importance of economic resources

The lack of funding for research and inadequate budgets for PhD dissertations and Master’s theses within EU were among the most compelling factors for establishing international partnerships. For example, one of the academics said:

Our institution has limited access to research funding for PhD students. It allocates only 25 thousand Eth Birr for a PhD research with which it is difficult to do a dissertation with the required quality. (Awgichew)

A similar view was expressed by Bayessa (another academic staff member) who explained: “As we cannot afford the required resources, we need to search alternative mechanisms”. In Bayessa’s opinion, international partnerships are needed to secure these kinds of resources.

Several staff and students expressed their appreciation of NORAD’s financial support for accomplishing the training and research activities, which would not have been possible without such support. For example, Shume (an academic) said, “We have got the opportunity to participate in many international conferences. This would not have been possible without their financial support”. Yegerem added: “I have got the opportunity to do fieldwork, which I had not done for many years because of financial constraints”. Also, one PhD student expressed:

For example, I got the opportunity to go to America and present my paper at an international conference. It is through their financial support that I did it. (Awol)

Many of the staff at EU described how academic-related motives are closely tied with economic-related ones. Ziad, one of the administrators, claimed: “Education and research capacity usually go with economic capacity”. Ziad argued that a high level of material and financial investment is required to offer quality training and to conduct quality research. In his opinion, it is natural that the institution is interested in acquiring financial and material assistance to carry out its academic function – graduate training and knowledge production – and respond to the socio-economic development needs of the nation. Some of the staff (e.g. Andualem) further stressed that the financial and material motive is not an expected output of, but a required input for, EU in its capacity-building efforts.

Other aspects of the economic-related rationales expressed in the study are infrastructural support and access to educational resources. This is evident in the partnership proposal which describes the intentions to establish language technology in EU, to improve Multimedia Documentation Lab of EU, and to produce language resources that would support the training. Similarly, staff also claimed that the required educational resources (libraries, labs, etc.) are either lacking or scarce in their department, and they expected this partnership to provide them with the opportunity to access some of these needed resources from their foreign partner.

Several of the participants also reflected their intentions for contributing to economic growth. For example, the proposal states that it is difficult to bring “about development … without respecting … and developing the linguistic and cultural dimensions” (p. 8). Similarly, Almaz (an academic staff member) mentioned the difficulty of realising the development of the country without due consideration to its
linguistic development. In this, she tried to justify the importance of this partnership. The proposal further dictates the need for ensuring the “relevance of . . . new graduates to . . . labour markets” (p. 15) – reflecting interests in enhancing global competitiveness. From this angle, it seems as if both addressing local needs and striving for more global achievements are considered important.

All the staff and students in the study revealed that the intention of this partnership programme was to produce skilled manpower who can conduct research and training, which, in turn, can contribute to the country’s economic development. They also, jointly, expressed the lack of resources that EU faces without having a Northern partner. However, PhD students (e.g. Mahlet and Addis) often expressed the need for accessing “Northern resources”, whereas academics and administrators talked more about various ways of developing capacity using Northern resources in their everyday work. Several also mentioned the need for EU to gain legitimacy through a stronger economic base.

**Partnership for societal development**

The results show that this partnership programme was expected to address social and community needs, expand social networking and connections, and ensure child rights and development. One focus area of the partnership programme, according to both interviews and documents, was training and workshops for local community members (educators and zonal authorities) to address societal and community needs. Educational provision in the mother tongue was also described as a means of addressing societal needs and promoting social development. In this regard, academic staff frequently praised their department’s effort to respond to the societal needs of educational access in the mother tongue. One of the academic staff said:

> Thanks to this partnership, my institution is working with the local community members or stakeholders of the disadvantage languages and contributing to the development of local languages. (Almaz)

It was evident in both interviews and the strategy documents that this partnership programme is expected to provide opportunities for furthering individual and institutional linkages with international scholars and institutions. One academic staff member explained the importance of networking and linkages:

> If you don’t have previous linkages with the Northern institution or scholars, you have less opportunity to be involved in joint projects. (Fuad)

As to Faud’s opinion, previous partnership programmes and personal links seem to serve as a basis in creating other partnering opportunities. This is also evident in the proposal in which the importance of forming different connections and networking is emphasised, for example, networks of academics for joint research and co-supervision, “networks of researchers . . . and local educators . . . for exchange of knowledge and . . . material” (p. 29). The formation of new linkages with other international institutions in education and research is stated as an expected outcome.
Discussion

Ethiopia is in the process of establishing a national policy framework for international partnerships in higher education. In line with this, universities are expected to emphasise international collaboration, form partnerships, and become trustworthy stakeholders in the international arena. This is also the intention of the selected case university (EU), and similar policy incentives and interests have been noted in other studies of Ethiopian Higher Education (see Kassie, 2020; Tamrat & Teferra, 2018). Sutton and Obst (2011) argue that strategic partnerships tend to reflect contemporary institutional demands. Herein, the establishment of the EU–NU partnership programme appears to be premeditated and part of a larger policy strategy. Several of the respondents, especially the administrative staff, point to the necessity of developing “global thinking” and “competency” through this programme and the necessity of more international contacts.

Yet, this study also shows that, this case university (EU) and the involved department lack well-articulated policy, procedure and priorities regarding international partnership formation and development. Instead, partnership formation and development followed what can be interpreted as an opportunistic approach that opens up options, without clear limits, goals, or priorities, for partnering with various parties in diverse areas. This indicates that all kinds of partnerships are seen as necessary. However, linked to its limited resources and capacity, EU aims to learn and thus partnering with high-profiled institutions in countries which have proximity to Northern donors. In EU and its academic units, partnerships that can secure their running costs from external sources are oftentimes welcomed. This reflects the consequence of the local partner’s dependence, as often observed in institutions with lower academic and resource capacity (Koehn & Obamba, 2014; Sanders & Wong, 2020). So, the question of developing “global thinking” and collaboration is complex. Like Ishengoma (2016) and Stein (2019), we can see how the Southern part of the world can easily become exploited by the Northern, although partnership programmes are formed with the intention of accomplishing the opposite (also in Bedenlier, Kondakci, & Zawacki-Richter, 2018).

The study shows how the main rationales expressed in the policy and practice of this partnership include combinations of academic, economic, or social-related interests and goals. These are the main motives expressed for engaging in an international partnership (Knight, 2004; Nyangau, 2018). It is also clear that these rationales are of different priority and that academic growth and development appear to have been given the highest emphasis in this particular case. This is consistent with the partnership programme’s focus on building the academic capacity of the local partner (Qiang, 2003). Part of this emphasis was concerned with staff capacity development. The shortage of qualified staff for running advanced teaching and research and the need to address this by producing PhD graduates were highly emphasised in documents and commonly viewed by participants as justifications for the establishment of the partnership. Academic staff participants are persuaded that working with NU would strengthen the capabilities of the local partner and contribute to staff and students’ academic growth and development (Nyangau, 2018; Sanders & Wong, 2020). They also express their beliefs that participating in such a partnership programme, with inputs from
experienced international scholars, affords substantial academic and professional benefits to individuals and the institution.

The EU–NU partnership programme was viewed as potentially contributing to building the research capacity of EU which the local partner could not otherwise accomplish independently (Lizarraga, 2011). Concerns about poor research status and capacity at EU were frequently mentioned, and several pointed to the need to address these issues through partnerships. The academic and administrative staff also emphasised the necessity of joining a global network through joint-research and development. They viewed joint-research as a venue for building their worldwide knowledge and research capacity and for producing more publications, and that this was one of their main reasons for participating in this partnership.

However, these expectations also raised tensions or even a kind of double agenda on what would happen without a Northern partner, or what autonomy would be given in collaboration with a partner that risks clear domination (Ishengoma, 2016; Samoff & Carrol, 2004). Similarly, the idea of the necessity of a “global connectedness” or a kind of “global thinking” within the context of the local (Ethiopian) and the global (Northern countries) became visible. In Stein’s (2019) description of different theoretical orientations in transnational collaboration, she points at the importance of not losing sight of the ontological oppression often part of many existing programmes for internationalisation. We think that the double agenda in this partnership programme could be an example of ontological oppression: when the participants described aiming for becoming more “global” by referring to problems of being “local” (Teferra, 2014; Tight, 2021).

The results show how this partnership programme is described as almost the main strategy for fixing local problems. The academic and administrative staff expressed a common expectation that the partnership would enhance their institution’s academic and research quality. The partnership is viewed to have a beneficial spill-over for the quality of education by spurring on conformity to international quality standards and by easing the development of programmes with the involvement of foreign staff (Seeber, Cattaneo, Huisman, & Paleari, 2016; Zeleza, 2012). For example, NU’s engagement in revision and design of the curricula is expected to improve the relevance and quality of education programmes and also to make graduate students adjust to international standards. Several participants also value the importance of involving “the foreign staff” in producing quality work in accordance with international standards.

Moreover, the partnership programme is viewed as a means to improve international awareness and experience of staff and students in teaching and research, and to develop competences that enable them to respond to, and work, in a global world (DeWit & Altbach, 2021; Seeber et al., 2016). Most of them were interested in engaging in international academic activities, such as academic exchange, joint-training, joint-research, and international conferences. Staff and students’ exposure to such international scholarly experience was valued for the local institution’s adjustment to the changing global trends.

Also, addressing resource dilemmas appears as the local partner’s second top priority rationale for collaborating with its Northern partner. Several participants expressed that EU tends to have academic problems due to resource scarcities. Consistent with this, Samoff and Carrol (2004) observe scarcity of resources as one of the primary drivers of African HEIs partnering with their Northern counterparts (also in Sanders & Wong,
The results also illustrate how the scarcity of financial resources was one of the prevailing factors compelling the local partner to search for international partnerships. For example, several of the staff (e.g. Dargie and Fuad) claimed that it was difficult even to think of doing research that demands a high level of costs without external funding sources. This suggests that the local partner’s involvement in international partnerships is dependent on the existence of external funding (Teferra, 2014; Tight, 2021). Funding was, hence, expected not as output, but as input, for running the projects and to bring about academic development. This appears to be different from what is often reflected among Northern collaborators. Tight (2021) argues that motives related to profit-making or earning income from international students and selling research products are common drivers of many Northern countries. These motives were not present in this study, and may be less common among Southern partners in general. Yet, some of the staff also tended to view the partnership programme as a source of personal income (Ishengoma, 2016). One could argue that such inclinations towards more personal financial benefits may not go with the larger and long-term institutional academic goals (Wilson, 2012). Moreover, several academics and graduate students talked about the shortage of educational infrastructure and resources and they valued this partnership for strengthening their infrastructural capacity and obtaining access to state-of-the-art resources (labs, libraries, journals, ICT …) available in partner institutions. This is consistent with Lin’s (2002) view that resource constraints motivate members of disadvantaged groups (the Southern partner) to form links with advantaged groups (the Northern partner) to gain access to better resources (also in Sanders & Wong, 2020).

Finally, the results show how partnerships are believed to create strong personal linkages with international colleagues that would increase the chance for the local researcher or student to initiate and establish new partnership programmes. The involvement of academics and students in previous partnerships was highly praised for expanding their social networking. The progress reports also acknowledged that partnership programmes have brought about further interconnections and partnerships. The graduate students also expressed high value to their engagement in this partnership for raising their social status and recognition upon their graduation from a world-class university, like NU. Related to this, Zink (2016) argues that interest in social status and job prospects is one of the important drivers of graduate students in Africa to navigate opportunities for international academic experience. However, it is also recognised that this desire for personal recognition and status in the international academic arena could partly destabilise institutional developments, goals, and capacity for institutional independence.

**Conclusion and implications**

This study shows that due emphasis has been given to the formation and expansion of international higher education partnerships in Ethiopia. Yet, its results also illustrate a loosely defined policy space at both national and institutional levels. Thus, governmental efforts are required to develop well-articulated policy frameworks for initiating, establishing, and administering international partnerships. It is also imperative that the local academic institutions use the existing policy space and
develop their strategies and specify priorities for establishing and managing the partnerships.

The results also illustrate that policy rationales related to academic growth and development are expressed as the most dominant driver of the EU for participating in international partnerships. One can argue that this has an important implication for international institutions and organisations seeking to establish partnerships with local institutions (Teferra, 2014; Woldegiorgis et al., 2018). Yet, resource scarcities continue to be the major compelling factor driving the local partners to partner with their Northern counterparts (Sanders & Wong, 2020). EU had limited resources to carry out academic and research functions, and motives related to addressing or complementing such scarcities are strongly interlinked with motives related to academic developments.

From this angle, partnerships are viewed as a means for the local partner to supplement resources required for further academic growth and development, to discover innovative solutions, and to respond to the present global realities. The involvement of the local partner in international partnership programmes was thus entirely dependent on external assistance provided by foreign partners and donors. This may lead local partners to be reactive to external initiatives that tend to compromise local priorities. This suggests the need for Southern partners to seek out and design mechanisms for obtaining internal funding and resources for international partnerships to proactively involve in, and be less dependent on, the partnership initiatives.

In conclusion, the results give valuable insights into the struggles that the Southern partners, such as EU, face in international partnership programmes. In particular, the results illustrate some of the demands, tensions, and opportunities expressed in policy and by the staff and students in this programme, which includes an act of balance between local capacity building and a more “global path” that could offer international legitimacy (Stein, 2019). In our view, this kind of double agenda demonstrates some of the risks involved in partnerships between the South and North that could work against mutual collaboration.

**Disclosure statement**

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the author(s).

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## Appendices

### Appendix A. Summary of declared rationales of EU–NU Partnership.

| Themes emerged as rationales from the document | Major themes |
|-----------------------------------------------|--------------|
| To build staff capacity in training, research, and community service (27) | Academic (60) |
| To enhance research outputs (15) | |
| To improve educational quality and raise international standards (11) | |
| To improve international experience in teaching and research (7) | |
| To improve infrastructural capacity and access to educational resources (lab, libraries, ICT, etc ...) (22) | Economic (49) |
| To improve access to funding/financial resources (for research, scholarship, training, conference, etc.) (22) | |
| To contribute to economic growth (by improving labour force, competitiveness, etc.) (5) | |
| To respond to social and community development needs (12) | |
| To improve social networks and connections (9) | |
| To ensure individual right and development (3) | |

### Appendix B. Summary of priority rationales as ranked by participants.

| No of Participants | Rationale Typology |
|--------------------|--------------------|
| 24                 | Academic | Economic | Social |
|                    | All (24) ranked it as 1st priority | 22 ranked 2nd | 2 ranked 2nd |
|                    | 2 ranked least | 1 ranked least |

### Appendix C. List of analysed documents and purposes.

| Documents | Pages | Purposes |
|-----------|-------|----------|
| The Second Growth and Transformation Plan | 185–192 | Understanding the underlying policy basis and contexts |
| The Fifth Education Sector Development Program | 110–113, 116–121 | |
| FDRE, The Higher Education Proclamation (2009) | 13–15, 36, 57 | |
| MoST, Science, Technology and Innovation Policy (2012) | 18–22, 25–26 | |
| 2015–2020 Strategic plans of EU | 35, 40–44, 93–100 | Exploring declared rationales and identifying the prioritised one |
| EU–NU Partnership Agreement document | 1, 2–6 | |
| EU–NU Partnership Proposal document | 1–30 | |
| 2016 Progress report | 3–9 | |