Can COIL be effective in using diversity to contribute to equality? Experiences of iKudu, a European-South African consortium operating via a decolonised approach to project delivery

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Abstract

The iKudu project is a north-south collaboration between five universities in South Africa and five in Europe. As an EU-funded project, the overall aim is to capacity build around internationalisation at home through Collaborative Online International Learning (COIL). Originally presented at IVEC2020, this paper explores how iKudu navigates and utilises concepts of equality, equity through decolonisation, and Africanisation. Drawing from experiences of the first year of operation, this paper presents how the iKudu project was designed with equality in mind in order to ensure that as many students can engage in internationalisation activities, but notes how the realities of decolonisation introduce challenging contradictions for the consortium to navigate, particularly around the use of the English language in a global context. This paper also presents some of the underlying working philosophies from the perspective of the iKudu leadership to show just how COIL can be effective in contributing to equality within internationalisation of Higher Education (HE).

Keywords: COIL, international, partnership, collaboration, equality, decolonisation.

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1.   Introduction

iKudu[3] is a current Erasmus+ funded capacity building project which involves five South African and five European universities[4] in establishing long term north-south COIL projects. COIL projects are designed to bring together learners from geographically distant institutions in order to undertake a meaningful collaborative activity that encourages global engagement and develops intercultural competences. Importantly, this form of internationalisation can be achieved 'from home' and without physical mobility (SUNY COIL, 2020). iKudu is designed to contribute to developing a contextualised South African concept of internationalisation of the curriculum and bringing an African perspective to the curricula of the European partner institutions.

The consortium itself is diverse: within the ten institutions, there are research-focused universities, universities of technology, and universities of applied sciences. There is also an element of inequity to navigate, with certain institutions located in less affluent areas, with limited access to technology. Within the lens of COIL, consortium partner universities differ in their experiences of internationalisation at home; certain institutions have a long history of embedding COIL into their teaching and learning, whereas others are just starting out on this journey.

The intended curriculum transformation through COIL includes a strong focus on Africanisation and decolonisation through a spirit of co-creation and co-equal partnerships. In total, the project aims to set up over 50 COIL projects between Europe and South Africa, to serve as a foundation for long term opportunities.

This paper focuses on these concepts of diversity and equality, and how north-south collaborations can utilise COIL when navigating issues of

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3. https://www.ufs.ac.za/ikudu/

4. iKudu consortium partners are: South Africa (University of Free State, Durban University of Technology, Central University of Technology, University of Venda, and University of Limpopo) and Europe (Coventry University, The Hague University of Applied Sciences, University of Siena, University of Antwerp, and Amsterdam University of Applied Sciences). References: Agyekum (2018); Almeida, Robson, Morosini, and Baranzeli (2019); Cooperrider, Whitney, and Stavros (2008); De Wit, Hunter, Howard, and Egron-Polak (2015); Esche (2018); IESA (2004); Liyange (2020); Molefe (2016); Nzimande (2017).

internationalisation at home through a decolonised lens. Drawing from existing literature and initial interview evidence with key iKudu stakeholders, this paper starts by exploring the concepts of equality and decolonisation in a north-south context. Further experiences of iKudu stakeholders will then be presented before offering conclusions as to how COIL can contribute to equality within the internationalisation of HE.

2.   Why COIL?

Internationalisation in HE is widely accepted as "the intentional process of integrating an international, intercultural or global dimension into the purpose, functions and delivery of post-secondary education, in order to enhance the quality of education and research for all students and staff, and to make a meaningful contribution to society" (De Wit, Hunter, Howard, & Egron-Polak, 2015, p. 283). However, internationalisation practices within HE have been criticised for being elitist, particularly with travel abroad being economically prohibitive for many students around the world (De Wit et al., 2015).

From the South African perspective, internationalisation has been an area of growing concern for over the past two decades, with the need to join up national policy and institutional practice being seen as a priority due to a perceived disconnect between the two (IESA, 2004). More recently, the South African Government has moved to draft policy to embed internationalisation, particularly through internationalisation at home, noting that overseas mobility presents an inherent limitation for South African institutions (Nzimande, 2017).

This idea of access for all was integral to the design of iKudu. During an interview conducted on August 25th 2020, Cornelius Hagenmeier, Chair of the iKudu consortium, noted:

> "the specific focus on internationalisation and COIL is a logical consequence of our focus to develop internationalisation in such a way that allows all students to participate. Traditionally when

internationalisation was based on participation to those who could afford to travel and the few who were excellent enough to be funded. Its benefit was limited to a small group of people".

During an interview conducted on August 25th 2020, Merle Hodges, iKudu consultant also notes:

"we as a South African HE system, feel that is it very important to internationalize, we want to impart of the world's knowledge production, we want to contribute to the SDGs [the United Nations Sustainable Development Goals] and develop our students with the necessary student attributes of employability, of critical thinking, of transdisciplinary thinking, so that they can become participants in the world arena".

The iKudu project therefore focuses on COIL as a form of internationalisation at home, due to the limited possibilities for other forms of traditional mobility within the north-south collaborative context. This helps ensure equality of access to students from all ten institutions. Indeed, internationalisation at home is seen as an approach that allows institutions in the global south to build capacity in HE and to challenge the hegemony of universities in the north (Almeida et al., 2019).

Within iKudu, the use of COIL also allows for a greater sense of democratisation within internationalisation and places focus on the specific local context of each university. Operating in an online space, ownership and creation of the COIL is designed to be 'co-equal' and should not be dominated by any one partner. In the spirit of co-equal partnering and decision-making, effort is shared, rather than dictated. Every institution is the expert in their own local context and this experience and expertise should be incorporated into the COIL design and delivery. Therefore, the diversity found within these institutions directly feeds into the rich intercultural exchange that COIL fosters as part of the international collaboration.

That being said, despite the clear benefits that COIL offers in terms of offering equality within internationalisation within HE, through offering

internationalisation at home without the need to spend on travel, things do get more complex when issues relating to equity and decolonisation are considered. Van Hove (2019) notes that COIL exchanges are not simply a 'cheap and easy' way of delivering internationalisation and instead requires much thought and effort in terms of design and delivery to make the collaboration truly meaningful.

3.   Navigating decolonisation

Decolonisation is an incredibly emotive issue, not least due to the difficult realities of the colonial legacy experienced in South Africa throughout the 20th and 21st century. South Africa is a world leader in challenging educational practices through decolonisation, with campaigns appearing from 2015 to pluralise education and to challenge "the domination of Western epistemological traditions, histories and figures" (Molefe, 2016, p. 32). This has gradually influenced European universities to reconsider their own approaches to HE, with Liyange (2020) labelling systemic racial inequality in HE as a 'silent crisis' in the UK and Europe.

Decolonisation can be seen as a 'levelling up' of the equality agenda, moving beyond equality of access to concepts of equity and truly co-equal partnership within HE. One of COIL's greatest strengths is that it is accessible to a larger pool of participants, particularly those who cannot engage with physical international mobility, and that COIL activity is strengthened through the diversity of its partners (De Wit, 2013, p. 1). That being said, issues of inequity do present themselves in COIL activity and it is within this decolonised space that iKudu is seeking to have meaningful impact.

The iKudu steering committee has taken steps to help enshrine a decolonised, Africanised approach to the project, with two working groups being created to help deliver all elements of the project. It is also important to note that, although this is an EU-funded project, project leadership is actually South African, with Cornelius Hagenmeier leading from the University of The Free State. Workgroup 1 focuses on researching the status of internationalisation

of the curriculum of the different partners involved and advising how these universities can best reach their own aims. Workgroup 2 focuses on developing the framework and trainings to realise the COIL collaborations between the universities. Both workgroups have equal representation from the northern and the southern institutions, promoting this idea of co-equal creation and allowing all stakeholders to influence and shape the project content.

During an interview conducted on August 25th 2020, Hodges stated:

> "when the iKudu project was formed, we looked at what is the government going to do and how does the government see HE within the African context. I quote from our national development plan: 'we are Africans, we are an African country, we are part of a multinational region, we are essential part of the continent, and we are acutely aware of the wider world and deeply implicated in our past and in our present. We want to have equal education and equal opportunity by the end of 2030'".

Despite the considered approach to iKudu project design and delivery, COIL itself presents two notable contradictions to decolonised practice. The first of these relates to English as the *lingua franca,* which Agyekum (2018) sees as 'linguistic imperialism', particularly in an Africanised context (p. 87). This is an unfortunate reality for globalised projects and one that iKudu is unable to fully address within the scope of the project. Although COIL activity within iKudu is delivered in English, this is perhaps one area that needs careful reflection on when considering the future of COIL through a decolonised lens.

The second contradiction relates to the delivery of staff training. Esche (2018) notes that the use of online learning is a traditionally western approach and indeed, in terms of length of experience, it is generally the European partners within the consortium who are taking the lead in the staff training, with the South African partners becoming the trainees. Although this may be viewed as an inherent flaw, iKudu is committed to ensuring that training serves as a baseline for activity, with Africanisation (and the challenging of northern models

of education) being put at the centre of the COIL activity so that decolonisation can be made integral to the capacity building going forwards.

Despite the existence of these challenges, all members of the consortium are committed to enshrining the spirit of decolonisation and Africanisation through iKudu and are striving to harness the inherent diversity within all of the stakeholders. This paper will now offer a snapshot of the experiences of some of these stakeholders from project activity to date.

4.   iKudu in practice

As we have seen, the iKudu project was designed with equality and decolonisation in mind, with a focus on creating this equal opportunity for all students. This was also reflected in practice by the project consortium chair Hagenmeier's iKudu philosophy, which focuses on international collaboration processes and capacity building:

> "we consider Africanisation, internationalisation and decolonisation as a complementary process. The question is not with whom you collaborate but how you collaborate. […] So this idea of equality, of using the existing diversity and to build up relationships between continents that were once colonizer and colonized was placed at the heart of the project. Internationalisation should be for everyone and these COIL projects can help to achieve these central ideas. With specific attention for capacitating academics to deliver an international viewpoint on internationalisation" (Interview conducted on August 25th 2020).

During an interview conducted on August 25th, 2020, iKudu consultant Hodges reinforced this idea of capacity building especially with an emphasis on transdisciplinarity:

> "this is what the COIL projects can do, to assist our academics, to improve their teaching and learning skills, their technological skills but also to

> improve their knowledge base, to make this more transdisciplinary, because our students need this critical thinking, they must communicate and collaborate and these are the skills needed in the new normal, after the pandemic".

The initial vision for delivery was impacted by the COVID 2020 crisis, and resulted in all training and development activity to move into an online space. As a result, only a limited number of projects have been completed to date but many projects are scheduled between September 2020 and January 2022. This activity was originally planned to take place between March and July 2020, when COVID cases were rising rapidly in Europe and institutions were preoccupied with transforming their existing courses to an online environment. Despite this setback, there are more than 20 projects planned for the period until January 2022, involving over 40 academics from all ten universities, from different educational fields. The process of partnering academics, delivering training, running the COIL projects, and evaluating these projects is done in a collaborative atmosphere, with workload shared across the consortium. Diversity is not only between South Africa and Europe but also interdisciplinary. Often the partnered academics work in cross-disciplinary COIL projects, where there is no direct match between the academic fields. This can provide new insights.

The experiences of academics that have already completed COIL projects are positive about iKudu. During an interview on the 28th September 2020, one Dutch academic reflected on their positive experience of transdisciplinary collaboration:

> "I was very interested in the field of the other academic, I thought how can we as a marketing lecturer and a nutrition researcher bring these fields together. Our students would do research on nutritional guidelines, but also interview each other, each other's food habits and the marketing side was focusing on the food trends and focusing on some sort of advice. That is how we combined the fields together, that is how we just loved it".

During an interview on the 28th September 2020, their South African partner academic confirmed this perspective and said: "the beauty is that it is cross disciplinary and really combines the different fields of expertise".

Also, the issues of diversity and how this was observed during the COVID-19 pandemic were addressed in the course. During an interview on the 28th September 2020, the Dutch academic noted: "this project took place during the pandemic, I made my students clear that in some countries the Coronavirus hits students harder, the students in South Africa might be more affected by this".

We can also observe that both academics focused on diversity and on intercultural sensitivity, specifically on letting the students reflect on their own culture, again demonstrating the innate ability of COIL to promote equality through sharing. During an interview on the 28th September 2020, the Dutch academic reflected on how their students may sometimes be perceived by students from other cultures as follows: "from previous projects with other countries we hear that Dutch students are sometimes seen as arrogant, as not really interested, be aware of this".

On the other hand, during the interview on the 28th September 2020, the South African partner highlighted that there are not only differences, but also sometimes surprising similarities between the students from each partner institution: "my students are surprised by the many similarities, the European students are very similar to us, like the same music, have similar topics and interest".

Another element which reinforces the foundation of equality in practice is the research work undertaken by iKudu's Workgroup 1. An appreciative enquiry is currently being undertaken in order to discover how internationalisation of the curriculum works in each context, across the consortium. "Appreciative Inquiry is the co-evolutionary, co-operative search for the best in people, their organizations, and the relevant world around them" (Cooperrider, Whitney, & Stavros, 2008, p. 66). This approach is therefore not intended to compare and rank institutions, but is to focus on sharing the lessons learned in each institution,

according to their context and highlight the cooperative approach in iKudu. The appreciative enquiry is now in the define stage, focusing on defining the stakeholders related to internationalisation. Details of the results of this piece of research will be reported in a forthcoming publication.

5.   Conclusions and next steps

The iKudu project seeks to develop, promote, and embed COIL as a tool for internationalisation at home for all consortium members. By its nature, the project is inclusive as the project strives to ensure students and tutors from across the consortium are able to access and engage in virtual learning through COIL. However, enshrining decolonisation and truly ensuring that all elements of the project are truly equitable remains a key consideration for the project and one that needs careful navigation. Differences in access to technology and class size are examples of inequitable differences that remain and should be addressed in the next phases of the iKudu collaboration.

This paper has shown that COIL can indeed contribute to equality within internationalisation at home activity, by bringing together staff and students of different cultures and working towards a common, global goal. Through its original design and project delivery across Workgroups 1 and 2, iKudu highlights the benefits of COIL in terms of equality.

The main focus for the iKudu consortium now is to continue operating in the ongoing face of the global pandemic in order to realise the crucial work being undertaken across the ten universities. Workgroup 1 will complete its appreciative enquiry in order to share insights into the unique journeys of all consortium members, whilst Workgroup 2 continues to train staff and to assist with the delivery of co-equal, decolonised, Africanised COIL projects. It is perhaps too early to draw conclusions on the impact iKudu will have in South Africa and Europe, but it is clear that it is an important project in terms of capacity building and producing critical research in the field of decolonised education studies.

Finally, iKudu Chair, Cornelius Hagenmeier during an interview conducted on 25th August 2020, noted that the iKudu project's success in managing diversity lies in common goals and shared trust:

> "often, I get asked how we manage to work successfully with such a diverse team. Personally, I think there are two which stand out: the common purpose and the trust capital on which our project has been developed".

It is clear that iKudu's sense of cooperation, trust, and co-equal partnerships will be key to the project having a long-lasting, positive impact.

6.   Acknowledgements

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