Fostering a culture of qualitative research and scholarly publication in a leading university in the West Bank: a Palestinian-UK capacity-building collaboration

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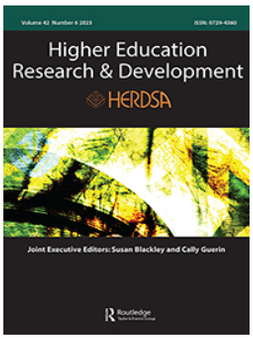

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Fostering a culture of qualitative research and scholarly publication in a leading university in the West Bank: a Palestinian-UK capacity-building collaboration

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ABSTRACT

Research practices in Arab universities, especially the use of qualitative methods, tend to fall behind international standards of excellence; hence, the relatively small number of qualitative journal articles published by Arab academics. Conducting research in Palestine is particularly problematic due to the continued Israeli occupation and its negative impact on Palestinian education. Certain cultural and historical factors pose further difficulties, specifically for qualitative researchers. To address the challenges with conducting qualitative research for its own staff and students, An-Najah National University (West Bank) collaborated with Coventry University (UK) to design and deliver a joint researcher-development programme on the uses of qualitative research methods, and the process and requirements of scholarly publication. Whilst implementing the programme, the team of British and Palestinian academics sought to examine the socio-cultural challenges of capacity-building between higher education institutions in the Global North and South – specifically in relation to qualitative research practice – and answer the question of how an equitable partnership between Global North and South institutions can be built. By engaging in Action Research, the North-South collaborators observed and analysed how Western researcher-development practices and assumptions were questioned, re-examined and adapted to give rise to a near-symmetrical relationship between the two institutions.

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Introduction

Qualitative research in the Arab world and Palestine

Scientific research in the Arab world, which has never been prioritised by higher education institutions (HEIs) in the region, is described as being in a critical situation

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(Almansour, 2016). Arab researchers face systemic difficulties, including the lack of clear research priorities and strategies, insufficient time and funding to meet research goals, inadequate institutional infrastructure, and limited awareness of the impact of professional scientific work (Abu-Orabi et al., 2020; Al-Ezzi, 2011; UNESCO, 2015).

Qualitative research, in particular, is still only an emerging trend in the Arab world, where less than 1% of all journal publications have used qualitative methods (Alhano, 2016). This historical paucity is due, at least in part, to practical difficulties around data collection in what are socially conservative countries (Hawamdeh & Raigangar, 2014; Kasim & Al-Gahuri, 2015). The commitment to high standards of research ethics, perceived as labour intensive, is also a deterrent to Arab researchers adopting qualitative methods (Makhoul & Nakkash, 2017).

These culture-specific problems are further compounded by local publishing practices. There seems to be a clear preference for quantitative research amongst Arab journal editors, to the extent that even studies about qualitative research tend to use quantitative methods (Al-Haji & Al-Sarmi, 2016). Gahtanee (2015) attributes this bias to a limited attention to quality criteria within qualitative studies, which makes them more difficult to evaluate and, therefore, accept for publication.

The aforementioned trends in research methodology across Arab HEIs have also shaped the field of education in the region. Arab academics' preference for quantitative over qualitative methodologies in education conforms to disciplinary practices adopted in the rest of the Global South (Crossley & Vulliamy, 1997). Although historically a disadvantage, this preference is now opening up new possibilities for scholarly work on problems and questions which have either been overlooked or have been examined solely through a quantitative lens (Crossley & Vulliamy, 1997).

The challenges that research and research development faces in the Global South, and specifically in the Arab world, are particularly acute in Palestine. The continued Israeli occupation imposes restrictions on different aspects of Palestinian daily life, including in education, which has a systemic negative impact on local HEIs (Shraim & Khlaif, 2010; Traxler et al., 2019). Primary amongst the problems of the Palestinian higher education (HE) sector are the chronic lack of funding, which undermines the quality of scientific research, the availability of research development opportunities, and opportunities for collaboration with regional and international institutions (Mogaji & Jain, 2020; Shraim, 2012). The underdeveloped research and information infrastructure of Palestinian HE is directly linked to insufficient financial support. Inadequate library resources and coordination between libraries, lack of information about international peer-reviewed journals and their publication policies, non-existent language and writing support are only some of the practical obstacles which Palestinian academics need to navigate in their efforts to conduct and publish their research (Qumsiyeh & Isaac, 2012; Shraim, 2012).

The research development collaboration: An-Najah National University, Palestine and Coventry University, UK

Located in the city of Nablus (West Bank), the An-Najah National University (ANNU) has been working hard to strengthen its research reputation and serve as an education leader not only locally – to meet community needs in sustainable economic, technical

and human development – but also globally, by promoting publications in high-ranking international journals, amongst other initiatives.

Like elsewhere in Arab academia (Abu Lughod, 2000), qualitative research has not been historically prominent within the Faculty of Education at ANNU, where most of the research outputs in the Arabic and English languages, including master's theses, are quantitative. The preference for quantitative over qualitative approaches, typical of Arab HEIs (Zahraa, 1996), has been part of a faculty culture and research tradition that holds 'numbers' in high esteem, often to the detriment of narrative data, which requires additional time to analyse. Even when qualitative methods have been used in education studies at ANNU, they have always been framed within a more positivist, quantitative-led perspective, in which quantitative methods provide an anchor of reliability (Affouneh et al., 2018; Traxler et al., 2019).

To redress this imbalance, the Faculty of Education enlisted the support of Coventry University (CU) to design and deliver a capacity-building programme for academic staff and master's students at ANNU. The collaboration was to help build local qualitative research capabilities, and, with that, the confidence to address issues of curriculum quality and inclusivity, student feedback, student–faculty and faculty–faculty relationships.

The aim of this research article is to examine the implementation of the ANNU-CU research-capacity building programme, and trace how Western expertise was transferred, questioned, and adapted in a Palestinian context. In particular, it will focus on the socio-economic and cultural challenges of practising qualitative research methods in an HEI in the Global South, as well as on the complex dynamics of a collaboration between HEIs from the Global North and the Global South, conceived of as an example of a transnational HE partnership (Koehn & Obamba, 2014). The research question guiding our study is how an equitable partnership between North and South institutions can be designed and implemented in the context of the power imbalances of global academia, and we hope that our experience and findings can inform fellow researchers' and researcher developers' practice in Palestine, other Arab states and further afield.

Theoretical framework

International development scholars identify systemic problems in conceptualising, implementing and evaluating North-South HE collaborations (Carbonnier & Kontinen, 2014; Mlambo & Baxter, 2018; Sriprakash et al., 2019). The inherent imbalances between institutions in the Global North and the Global South, in terms of funding, expertise and opportunities for impact, can be easily replicated in cross-regional academic and research work. Typically, project funding and strategic planning are based in the North; countries and institutions in the South are treated as sites for data collection and experimentation; South-based researchers are cast in the role of junior staff and are assigned low-level tasks, such as gathering and systematising of data, while the high-end cognitive work happens in the North (Holmarsdottir et al., 2013). The resulting inequalities in agency, benefits and long-term sustainability of this model have come under severe criticism from postcolonial theory, which questions the feasibility and ultimate impact of mainstream international development initiatives (Heleta & Bagus, 2021; Martin & Griffiths, 2012).

During the process of conceptualising, designing and implementing the ANNU-CU joint researcher-capability-development programme, the collaborating institutions were mindful not to replicate centre-periphery models and maintain an equitable and balanced relation between North- and South-based partners. Our work was guided by Bhabha's notion of 'Third Space', as interpreted by Martin and Griffiths (2012, p. 921), which allows for genuine intercultural exchange, learning and knowledge production:

> During an intercultural conversation individuals occupy their own cultural space; it is only by stepping out of this space into the space *between*, that learning from the dialogue can take place. It is incumbent on both parties to do this and to create a Third Space in which new meanings and understandings can emerge.

By adopting a dialogic, open and flexible approach to collaboration, CU and ANNU worked hard to avoid the pitfalls of asymmetrical, centre-periphery types of relationship and the accompanying epistemological and ethical problems. Both institutions strove to understand each other's contexts, current priorities and future goals, and adapted their input into the programme, accordingly, thereby establishing a process of joint, intercultural meaning-making and knowledge production**.** Naturally, our constructive approach did not redress all existing asymmetries between the two institutions, some of which continued to influence the joint programme. Our approach was guided by the model of 'near-symmetrical' 'transnational higher-education partnerships (THEPs)' proposed by Koehn and Obamba (2014, p. 14, 2) which transcends the impractical binary division between absolute equality (symmetry) and absolute inequality (asymmetry) among partner institutions in the Global North and the Global South. Building on the work of Obamba et al. (2011, p. 4; as cited in Koehn & Obamba, 2014, p. 14), Koehn and Obamba provide the following explanation of their model:

> Near-symmetrical THEPs do not require absolute equality or sameness nor imply that the power imbalances inherent in mutually influencing transnational relationships must be entirely eliminated. Indeed, differentiation and complementarity among partners typically is the underlying rationale for collaboration in the first place. Therefore, many high-impact transnational research and development partnerships adopt an approach based on *complementarity and equity* rather than insisting on the pursuit of complete equality or symmetry between the Northern and Southern partners (. . .). (2014, p. 14)

Methodology

Action Research (AR) was adopted to address the research aims of examining the socio-cultural challenges of capacity-building between HEIs in the Global North and the Global South, as exemplified by CU and ANNU. AR was well suited to help us create knowledge and improve ourselves as Global South-North teacher-researcher-participants through practical deliberation, whilst addressing the research question of how an equitable partnership between North and South HEIs can be designed and implemented (McNiff & Whitehead, 2006, p. 7). We used an AR methodology for South-North qualitative researcher development as a social practice, focused on cycles of interpretation and negotiation (rather than focused on top-down research quality enhancement).

AR is an established approach in HE (Zuber-Skeritt, 1993), seeking to empower and enthuse participants to improve their academic practices (Kember et al., 2019). Being

collaborative in nature, AR involves deconstructing, interrogation, and de-centring through cycles of planning, acting, observing, and reflecting (Carr & Kemmis, 1986).

Ontologically, constructivism (Lincoln & Guba, 2016) underpinned our AR approaches, embracing 'living theory' contexts (McNiff & Whitehead, 2006) in the relationship between the knower and knowable (what is to be known), whilst acknowledging personal, context-specific subjectivities. Epistemologically, knowledge creation would be gained through the process of dialogue – through deconstruction as interrogation, meaning-making, and sense-making, and through active implementation and reflection. As part of these confronted and encountered situations (Lincoln & Guba, 2016, p. 41), de-centring would relate not only to de-centring western qualitative research perspectives, but also de-centring the more traditional rational-deductive-quantitative rationales locally experienced. Such a process required critical discernment in terms of axiology; considering how as co-participants any enhanced researcher-knowledge would be preferred, valued, and feel most useful 'as a conceptual structure, theory, discipline, or philosophy (most of which would have only local or even personal significance)' (Lincoln & Guba, 2016, p. 45).

Process

Ethical approval to conduct the AR was sought from CU only, as such approval was not required by ANNU. Twenty-five academic staff and five master's students from the Education and Psychology departments at ANNU took part, and gave informed consent for the sharing and documentation of perspectives. The AR approach was initiated by a two-day intensive workshop facilitated by the second author, the workshop itself commencing the AR cycles of action and reflection (Kemmis & McTaggart, 2005) by beginning with an investigative phase, moving to planning, leading into active experimentation and then reflection again upon the consequences of action. Workshop content focused on qualitative research practices with questioning and discussion about the more typical quantitative perspectives used within educational research practice, and how such approaches were leading to improved educational outcomes for ANNU students (Elliott, 2015). An overview of qualitative research practices, issues of researcher positionality, and questions of ontology, epistemology and axiology were examined, before considering a range of qualitative methodologies and their aligned methods. Time for discussion (requiring translation support by the Arab academics with advanced English language skills) provided valuable evaluative feedback – also captured on the workshop-room walls each day using post-it notes. Day Two focused more on case-study exemplars, with participants in small groups discussing potential research-question areas aligned to their teaching practices.

A second set of workshops – prompting a further set of AR cycles of action and reflection, held over three days – followed a few months later, providing space to revisit how the working groups' practices had been developing, and offering opportunity to discuss their more nuanced issues which had come to the fore through their active experimentation. Importantly, the second phase of the capacity-building programme included input from a CU Academic Writing Developer, the third author of this paper, who was to help ANNU participants understand qualitative research-article conventions through workshops and supervised writing sessions. He was scheduled to deliver two

workshops on the research-article genre on the first day of Phase Two, and a Scholarly Writing Retreat on Days Two and Three. The first of the workshops focused on reporting and analysing qualitative research data, while the second workshop discussed the overall framing of a research argument, including the contributions and limitations of a study. Both workshops were based on the scholarship of leading US and UK researchers in academic writing, namely Swales and Feak (2004), and Thomson and Kamler (2013). Due to unforeseen circumstances, the Scholarly Writing Retreat, at the end of Phase Two had to be converted into one-to-one and group consultations with ANNU participants (serving as an active AR phase), in which the writing developer could advise on plans and drafts of research articles in progress (Murray et al., 2008).

Data collection and analysis

As part of the AR cycles, various methods of data collection were used, including workshop observations and notes captured by participants and shared on the walls, post-workshop evaluation forms designed by the CU colleagues, reflective journaling (CU and ANNU) plus interviews and focus groups co-facilitated between CU and ANNU workshop leads (with data from such dialogue transcribed). Email exchanges between CU and ANNU participants, sharing reflections and actions raised, were also included.

The UK co-participants-researchers led in the area of data analysis which was then cross analysed and verified alongside four main ANNU colleagues (all of whom are the authors of this paper), with the South-teacher-researcher-participants leading in implementing the qualitative research-inspired education practices/strategies. Data were analysed thematically (Braun & Clarke, 2006) in terms of how ANNU participants' reflections and ongoing actions, through shared dialogue, revealed the issues they faced, problems to overcome, and whether their situation improved, or not. This required progressing from description (where the data from participants were organised to show patterns in content, and were summarised) to interpretation (where themes were developed, illustrating the significance of the patterns and their broader meanings and implications). The process entailed iterative stages of reading, re-reading, preliminary coding and generation of themes and their subthemes, and sharing the findings with all participants for feedback, as part of collective sense-making.

The three overarching themes, contextualised with data evidence, include: how ANNU participants approached qualitative research in the first place (Findings: Section 1); how their cultural assumptions and those of their CU collaborators were questioned and re-examined during the implementation of the capacity-building programme (Findings: Section 2); and, finally, how the programme itself and the co-participants' understanding were adapted and transformed to foster an equitable, near-symmetrical relationship between CU and ANNU, as two institutions from the Global North and South, respectively (Findings: Section 3).

Quality criteria

Within our AR study, the focus throughout was on maintaining a unifying approach as co-participants in a 'teacher as researcher movement' (Carr & Kemmis, 1986, p. 1). In other words, we sought to engage ourselves in a research-based and professional-

development self-evaluation programme as a way to examine and renew our researcher stance towards our educational practices. Our workshops, our reflections (shared between contacts), post-group discussions and email exchanges served to offer opportunity for co-participants to develop ownership and evaluate any shifts in thinking and acting, as shared accountability.

As South-North teacher-researcher-participants, everyone's active involvement and ways to influence the work was paramount, with workshop content and working-group plans remaining visible and open to suggestions throughout the AR process.

Understanding the education context and issues at stake, with regard to strengthening ANNU's education-research practices in the qualitative domain, required a critical engagement and examination of the literature and policy context to date, so that any claims from our inquiry could be interpreted against an authenticated evidence base.

Findings

Section 1: qualitative research at ANNU – the gap in the local provision

In their evaluative feedback forms, the vast majority of the programme participants declared little or no experience with using qualitative methods in their own research and teaching practice, the reasons being broadly aligned with the scholarship on qualitative research in the Arab World, Palestine and ANNU (Abu-Orabi et al., 2020; Makhoul & Nakkash, 2017; Zahraa, 1996). Specifically, participating lecturers shared their – and their students' – concerns that qualitative methods are 'difficult', and, as such, require much skill, effort and time to master. The expected level of commitment was seen as a deterrent both to the use of qualitative methods by staff and to their wider dissemination amongst students working on research projects, such as master's dissertations. References were made to an internal review conducted at ANNU's Faculty of Education which examined 100 randomly selected master's dissertations and discovered that not a single one of them used qualitative data. Such categorical, 100% unanimity in favour of quantitative data testifies to systemic problems in lecturers' engagement with qualitative research at the faculty; however, it is also indicative of deep-seated problems with research practices in general, as such heavy preferences for one type of research methodology will leave research topics and questions – those suitable for qualitative study – unexamined. In this regard, our findings confirm insights from Abu Lughod (2000) and Crossley and Vulliamy (1997), amongst others.

When qualitative methods are taught at ANNU's Faculty of Education, this is often done through examples of triangulation, whereby lecturers rely on students' knowledge of quantitative methods to scaffold their acquisition of qualitative approaches. Although undoubtedly a step in the right direction, such a strategy reinforces a hierarchical relationship, and does little to promote qualitative research in its own right (Affouneh et al., 2018; Traxler et al., 2019).

Cultural factors were also invoked as a barrier to qualitative research, although these seemed to be more a matter of entrenched institutional practices rather than linked to fundamental social factors, such as religion or political beliefs. Programme participants referred to an institutional 'mindset' or 'mentality' which runs against the philosophy and practice of qualitative methodology. This culture clash was particularly evident in some

of the more abstract workshop discussions around, for example, the values of qualitative research, and, at times, seemed to hinder communication between facilitator and participants.

Section 2: the challenges experienced with north-south researcher capacity building

The CU facilitators were very much aware of the geopolitical and ethical implications of collaborating with partners in the Global South and tried to mitigate, as much as possible, any asymmetry in the design and delivery of the researcher-development programme at ANNU (Koehn & Obamba, 2014). The fact that it was the Palestinian partners who had identified the need for the intervention, obtained local funding and commissioned, in broad terms, the content of the programme ensured that they maintained a level of agency and control over the proceedings throughout (Carbonnier & Kontinen, 2014; Rethinking Research Collaborative, 2018).

ANNU's initiative is evident from the reflection of the CU writing developer who recalls how the plans and materials for his sessions were requested by the lead Palestinian partner for feedback and approval well in advance of their delivery. This was a welcome exchange, in his view, as it allowed ANNU opportunity for input; and he felt greatly reassured in his approach when approval was given by a senior academic who understood local learning and development needs. Furthermore, cultural self-awareness and respect for otherness were guiding principles followed by the lead CU facilitator, and second author, in teaching qualitative research at ANNU. Her attempts to decentre the implicitly western values and concepts underpinning academic knowledge production in general, and qualitative research more specifically, reveal a shifting balance of authority and power away from a hegemonic western viewpoint:

> I was keen that participants would have lots of time for group discussion and personal work. I was aware also of decentring the Western lens of my research practice. One area for my personal learning and growth was to enquire how Arab knowledgies [*sic*] could be applied. It was important to me that, if colleagues would be conducting their research locally, those Arab ways of knowing should guide their practices, as well as their understanding of the Western lens of qualitative research.

Despite the CU facilitators' understanding of the specificities and challenges when working in the Global South, they could not foresee and prepare for all the logistical and cultural difficulties they encountered in the process of collaboration. Reciprocal difficulties were reported by the ANNU participants. Challenges varied in nature and magnitude, but even technical issues, such as session formats and the working language of the intervention, proved embroiled in deeper institutional and cultural conditions that only emerged in the process of interaction and collaboration between facilitators and participants. The pre-agreed schedule and content of Phase Two of the intervention, for example, included an intense succession of workshops on the use of qualitative methods and on writing for publication, over one day, followed by a two-day Scholarly Writing Retreat, during which participants would be given the opportunity to work one-to-one with the CU writing developer. Such an arrangement proved difficult to follow as the Palestinian organisers could not enlist a sufficient number of university staff who

were able to protect the necessary time out of their busy teaching calendars for research development, even though one of the three days of the programme was deliberately scheduled to coincide with the weekend. The time constraints of ANNU academics align with the conditions elsewhere in the Arab world, where heavy teaching workloads restrict time dedicated to research and researcher development (Abu-Orabi et al., 2020; Al-Ezzi, 2011; UNESCO, 2015).

To accommodate the change in circumstances, the CU writing developer converted the Scholarly Writing Retreat into scheduled one-to-one and group consultations, and spread out his workshops across two days to allow participants to keep abreast of the content and engage more fully.

The language barrier proved another multidimensional problem during the intervention. The language of instruction at ANNU is Arabic, but the aims of the researcher-development programme were to improve qualitative research practices with the view to allowing ANNU scholars to publish in leading international journals in English. Such aims created a level of expectation for the CU facilitators with regard to the participants' proficiency in the language. During the workshops, however, the help of some Palestinian participants was required to provide ad-hoc translation when necessary. Given the abstract nature of the programme content, the possibility of inconsistent vocabulary rendition created uncertainty that troubled the dynamics of the sessions.

The language of instruction, compounded by the lack of prior experience with qualitative research, was also a challenge to the Palestinian participants who felt unsure about their grasp of the programme content in the short time allocated. A loss of confidence was particularly noticeable at the beginning of Phase One, when many challenging concepts related to theoretical approaches and research design were introduced. Some participants reported a general difficulty of mapping new qualitative research terminology onto their prior quantitative research experience, and being confused by conceptual differences between, for example, 'methodology' and 'methods', 'experimental' and 'qualitative research'. When asked to complete related tasks, they struggled to draft a code of conduct for ethics, to name strategies they would adopt to build trust with their respondents, or formulate suitable interview questions. This led to a certain level of anxiety amongst individual participants who wanted reassurance from the lead CU facilitator that their experiencing difficulties was not unusual but was part of a natural learning curve.

Problems with communication were sometimes embedded in the socio-political context of the North-South intervention and, specifically, the recent history of Palestine and Palestinian HE. In his reflection, the CU writing developer recounted an exchange with a senior academic at ANNU where their frames of reference were distinctly at odds. During a writing consultation, the developer was asked to provide advice on a qualitative research project using semi-structured interviews. The project was focused on 'dialogue in the classroom', which the writing developer thought was an important but rather broad concept that needed further qualification. To gain more insight into the topic, he started asking exploratory questions about the background of the research and its theoretical framework. His questions about the meaning of 'dialogue' were informed by his own research in literary studies and education, where the concept is often interpreted in highly abstract terms, for example in the works of Mikhail Bakhtin or Julia Kristeva. The researcher's answers, however, suggested a much more

straightforward and pragmatic understanding of 'dialogue' as 'an interpersonal exchange', which appeared somewhat out of place. The writing developer reported:

> I was told that dialogue was the focus of the study because Palestinian people are dialogic and collaborative, and seek to reach out to others, and that these cultural and social characteristics underpin every aspect of their lives, including classroom pedagogy. The senior academic told me that the project sought to counter a particular representation – in the West and globally – of Palestinians as incapable of dialogue, and as such, it was extremely important for him and his country. It was clearly a matter of doing justice to what the researcher perceived as his and his country's national identity, and therefore an extremely important issue to consider.

This clash of understanding highlights two very different attitudes to research problems and the value of research in general. If scholars in the UK can afford to de-politicise their research, to conceive of phenomena in partially or purely abstract terms, the immediate concerns of their Palestinian counterparts seem embedded in the local political landscape. The sense of a mission, the sense that a research project will necessarily contribute to the story of the Palestinian people and, as such, to the project of nation building in Palestine, seems decidedly different from the current academic ethos in the Global North. It is, however, fully in line with the history of HE in Palestine, which is intricately connected with the idea of Palestinian nationhood and the creation of an independent Palestinian state (Bruhn, 2006).

Section 3: collaborative work to co-create new knowledge and skills

Despite the difficulties and challenges that accompanied the ANNU-CU collaboration, the researcher-development programme delivered at the Palestinian institution received an overwhelmingly positive feedback, as evidenced by post-it notes displayed on room walls, evaluative feedback forms from the sessions, and conversations between organisers and participants. The success of the intervention was undoubtedly due to the unflagging motivation of everybody involved, but primarily the Palestinian participants themselves. The CU facilitators reported that the premises where the workshops and consultations took place were over capacity with staff and students ready to sacrifice part of their weekend to develop as better scholars and researchers.

The desire to learn and improve stimulated the programme participants to be active parties to the sessions, so much so that they ultimately set the pace of delivery and, to a certain degree, the focus of discussion in the workshops. Both CU facilitators talk about the participants' engagement in their sessions thorough feedback, including requests for translation and clarification, which created an ongoing dialogue – an open exchange of views, opinions and expertise. The participants' input turned the programme into a collaborative endeavour whereby genuine co-creation of knowledge took place, knowledge which would not have been possible without the clash and cross-pollination of perspectives and experiences from the Global North and the Global South.

The first author captured her own participation in the sessions and their collaborative atmosphere in the following way:

> I have learned a lot through the workshop. (…) I was able to give examples in Arabic about each type [of qualitative research] to support the participants' understanding, to give time for the trainer to breathe and continue, since I found that it is very hard to train people from

> another culture. I felt I needed to be there all the time to support the expert and also to support the participants, since I was familiar with both. I also observed the way the participants cooperated in order to support each other, since they are from different disciplines and [have] different levels of English. They supported each other through explaining, reflecting and sometimes questioning ideas and information.

The practicalities of delivering the ANNU-CU researcher-development intervention compelled both facilitators and participants to go beyond their pre-conceived, and often culturally determined ideas about research- and academic-staff-development practices. The challenges and frictions that arose out of their transnational collaborative work resulted in an open dialogue in which they were able to reflect on each other's and their own experiences as education scholars, thereby creating a hybrid space where new meaning and knowledge were produced. The capacity-building programme itself became an example of Bhabha's Third Space (Martin & Griffiths, 2012, p. 921) where a genuine intercultural exchange and engagement between North and South was possible.

Conclusion

Although this study has not tracked how the ANNU-CU collaboration has changed the publication rates of individual participants, there is strong evidence to suggest that our joint intervention has impacted positively the collective research ethos and practice at the Palestinian institution. The lead ANNU collaborator and first author of this article reports that soon after the ANNU-CU intervention members of staff at ANNU set up an Education Research Support Unit (ERSU), outside the structure of the Faculty of Education and largely on a voluntary basis. At present, the unit, which was largely modelled after the CU Centre for Academic Writing, is made up of a Coordinator and several Fellows, each of whom provides a specialised research- and writing-development support, such as publication support (including identifying a suitable scientific or scholarly journal), methodological support (with both qualitative and quantitative research methods), and academic writing support. Out of all unit staff, only the Coordinator receives institutional recognition for his work in the form of a small remission from his teaching workload.

The first author reports further that since the ANNU-CU collaboration (in 2019), and the subsequent setting up of the ERSU, the number of staff at ANNU's Faculty of Education engaged in research writing has increased dramatically. The proportion of staff who did not have a single journal publication was as high as 40% in 2017-2018; by the autumn of 2021, this percentage had been reduced to zero. A progress of such magnitude received institutional recognition at ANNU, when, in April 2021, the Faculty of Education was designated as the university area with the fastest developing research culture and biggest rise in publication outputs.

The developments following from the ANNU-CU intervention testify to the powerful impetus and change that a partnership between HEIs in the Global North and Global South can create. As organisers and participants in this specific collaboration, we are delighted that our work has inspired academic staff in Palestine to work on a voluntary basis to forge a support network for colleagues aspiring to publish. ANNU colleagues have successfully appropriated and gone beyond the intellectual input offered by

Northern academics to take charge of their own professional and researcher development, showing how Southern partners can emancipate themselves in the unequal playing field of North-South collaborations.

However, the example of the ERSU also shows that the empowerment of Southern academics is often precarious, as more than three years since the unit was set up it is yet to secure institutional funding at ANNU. Local academics are currently applying to Northern funders to maintain and expand the unit's support provision in the short-to-medium term. With all their enterprise, hard work and motivation, the Palestinian partners in our joint collaboration have not been able to escape the economic asymmetries of the Global North-South divide. Their achievement has proved limited, thereby confirming Koehn and Obamba's (2014) understanding that deep-seated structural imbalances in international HE can only partially be redressed. However, the adverse dynamics of global academia should not distract from the insights gained through the ANNU-CU collaboration, which can inform a set of guiding principles for transnational HE partnerships.

First of all, accepting near-symmetry as a *modus operandi* in transnational HE partnerships is an important step towards redressing inequalities in global academia as it helps us focus on tangible results rather than success in absolute terms, which could be unrealistic, demotivating and ultimately detrimental to international collaborations. A pragmatic choice to calibrate the scope of and expectations from international projects is thus more likely to contribute towards an equitable future through incremental change. We believe that the impact of the ANNU-CU collaboration in terms of the rise in the number of publications at ANNU and the creation of the ERSU, albeit with limited resources and uncertain future, speaks directly to how the concept of near-symmetry can help frame and effect positive outcomes.

Secondly, dialogue, as a governing principle of partners jointly inhabiting an intercultural third space, has to be actively maintained throughout the lifecycle of a collaboration, which is likely to disrupt a traditionally linear trajectory of planning, implementation and evaluation. A North-South HE partnership is far more likely to go through iterative stages of adjustment and realignment during its implementation to capture the ongoing negotiation of priorities and challenges. In the case of our ANNU-CU initiative, the CU partners took special care to include their Palestinian colleagues in the design of the researcher-development programme, and yet substantial changes had to be made as co-created plans had to be put into practice. What seemed particularly difficult to anticipate were the exact cultural and institutional differences which would ultimately influence the course of the collaboration. As we did not know *what* we did not know about each other, we had to be flexible, creative and open to alternative courses of action.

None of this would have been possible, of course, without the favourable interpersonal dynamics between participants and facilitators on both sides of the collaboration. All parties involved worked very hard to develop and maintain mutual trust, commitment and rapport that made it possible to talk freely, discuss problems, and challenge each other's biases and preconceived ideas, whilst remaining enthusiastic and positive throughout. The sense of letting go of one's own cultural frame of reference during the collaboration contributed immensely to the forging of mutual understanding and empathy on a very human level.

The extent to which we relied on this personal bonding during the ANNU-CU collaboration makes it the third, and perhaps decisive, overarching principle for success. We believe that actively cultivating a friendship amongst participants and stakeholders can build in resilience in a South-North HE partnership that can help it navigate more successfully socio-economic and intercultural challenges.

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