

## TOWARD BUILDING STRATEGIC INTERNATIONAL UNIVERSITY-SOCIETY PARTNERSHIPS IN AFRICA

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**Abstract:** In order to redefine the university-society relationship, African universities aspire to forge new partnerships with local, national, regional, and international actors. Employing a critical review of the literature and an analysis of the strategic plans of regional African organisations and African universities, this study explores the challenges and opportunities of creating strategic university-society partnerships in Africa. Against a backdrop of African universities fashioned after modernity, the study draws from (1) “Mode 2” knowledge production, “Mode 3” research, entrepreneurial university, and academic capitalism, (2) the helices models and epistemic cultures, (3) power dynamics in international negotiations over educational policy, and (4) uBuntu and Cosmo-uBuntu, to inspire African universities towards contextual relevance and significance. Furthermore, the study proposes a conceptual framework of strategic international university-society partnerships to inform policy making, strategic planning, and further research.

**Keywords:** *power dynamics; international negotiations; uBuntu; policymaking; knowledge production*

### Introduction

A strategic educational partnership presupposes a reciprocal relationship between two or more parties aimed at achieving specific educational and socio-economic development goals (Tedrow and Mabokela 2007; Kaguhangire-Barifajjo and Namara 2012). The rationale is to secure strong public relations, enhance professional and curriculum development, increase opportunities for student interactions, improve research, and secure funding opportunities (Semali et al. 2013; Kot 2014). Moreover, such a partner-

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ship can enable knowledge co-creation (Machimana et al. 2020) and has implications for policy making, teaching, and service at the university.

In the post-colonial African context, educational partnerships have been deemed necessary for economic, social, and technological advancement (Machimana et al. 2020). Obamba et al. (2013) claim that African countries deem domestic partnerships insufficient, thus seek to collaborate with international partners, particularly Western, in order to fulfil educational and research goals (Molosi-France and Makoni 2020). This emphasis on such collaborations is in line with government mandates and aspirations toward fulfilling the UN Development Goals and has led, consequently, to a recent increase in educational investments by the West, including the United States of America (USA) and the European Union (EU).

Despite the prospects of the university-society partnerships between African and Western countries, the educational and social development outcomes largely remain unrealised, partly because of the asymmetrical power relations between the partners (Samoff and Carrol 2004; Machimana et al. 2020; Semali, Baker and Freer 2013; Cossa 2018a). Given that Western universities wield a variety of modalities of power, it is not surprising that African universities comply with their terms of negotiation and engagement (Cossa 2008). Partnerships might fail to yield the desired outcomes because they are modelled after Western educational systems, thus incompatible with the values and the needs of the African communities (Bassey 1999).

However, a rigorous analysis of the nature of Strategic University-Society Partnerships (henceforth referred to as SUSP) in Africa is needed (Obamba et al. 2013) in order to deepen our understanding. The gaps in our understanding reveal the need for reconceptualising how existing partnerships are formulated (Cossa 2018a), as well as how and to what extent emerging university-society partnerships affect teaching, research, and university service to society (Bekele and Ofoyuru 2021).

This article explores SUSP in Africa through a review of the literature on educational partnerships and an analysis of the strategic plans for selecting African universities and organisations with education mandates. Against a backdrop of a higher education fashioned after modernity and its tenets of personal individuation, structural differentiation and cultural rationalisation (Schmidt 2010), the study draws on (1) “Mode 2” and “Mode 3” knowledge production, entrepreneurial university, and academic capitalism in order to explain the rationales and motives behind emerging partnerships,

(2) the helices models and epistemic cultures in order to explain modalities and strategies of partnerships, (3) power dynamics in international negotiations of educational policy in order to problematise positionality, and (4) uBuntu and Cosmo-uBuntu, as contextually-derived philosophical and theoretical frameworks, in order to inspire African higher education towards contextual relevance and significance.

We hope that the engagement of Western and African philosophical and theoretical perspectives, and the critical literature review and policy analysis will render a nuanced and holistic understanding of SUSP in Africa. The study aspires to contribute to deepen our understanding of the strategic positioning of African universities in the highly competitive and modernistic world of higher education. The purpose is to contribute towards conceptualising strategic and meaningful contextual partnerships and identifying mitigation strategies to current and future challenges. Our aim is to contribute to existing research, inspire further research, inform the educational policy making and policy planning community, and inspire practice towards forging meaningful contextual partnerships.

We conjecture that the modernistic perception of higher education and Western conceptualisations and models of university-society partnerships dominate global discourse and practice, thus partly hinder the creation of contextual university-society partnerships in Africa. If supported, this conjecture will inspire new conceptual models for university-society partnerships that defy hegemonic discourse and practice in favour of contextual models and practices. The assumption is that a nuanced understanding of the phenomenon is possible through an analysis of (1) continental and institutional rationales, (2) partnership strategies and mechanisms, (3) opportunities and challenges, and (4) power dynamics. Drawing on extant literature, relevant theories and policy analyses, this study engages in the overarching question about the theoretical and methodological features and attributes of SUSP in Africa. For our purposes, the concept SUSP refers to agreements between local, national, and international academic institutions and organisations that work toward common goals by sharing resources and information, enhancing educational and research facilities, extending support for community engagement, and creating opportunities for knowledge creation and dissemination.

## Philosophical-Theoretical Framework

Traditional theories and models that epitomise cross-sectoral organisational alliances (Franke 2017) may not be sufficient to explain emerging university-society partnerships. Theoretical frameworks that delineate recent transformations in higher education and society globally appear more relevant. The helix models generally explain how universities, governments, and industries interact to enhance economic and social development. They “define the role universities are expected to play in the process of innovation and sustainable development in contemporary times” (Fronzizi et al. 2019: 2) by providing primarily economic rationales behind the creation of partnerships among universities and other organisations. For instance, the Triple Helix model explains university-industry-government partnerships (Etzkowitz and Leydesdorff 2000); the Quadruple Helix model adds media-based public and civil society to the Triple Helix; and the Quintuple Helix model adds “the environment” to the Quadruple Helix (Carayyanis and Campbell 2012). The helix models also explain how and why university governance becomes more transparent, participatory, inclusive, and accountable (Bekele and Ofoyuru 2021).

The entrepreneurial university model, Mode 2 knowledge production, and Mode 3 knowledge production are alternative theoretical frameworks that explain the nature of university-industry-government partnerships globally. The entrepreneurial university model primarily explains university innovation and entrepreneurial activities (Audretsch 2014; Clark 2004; Etzkowitz 2014). “Mode 2” knowledge production explains the changing nature of scientific research to improve its social relevance and significance (Nowotny et al. 2003), whereas “Mode 3” explains the nature of university-society engagements regarding socio-economic development, democratisation, and public accountability (Barnnet 2004; Carayannis and Campbell 2006; Rhoades and Slaughter 2006). Academic capitalism and the new economy explain the commercialisation of education and research in higher education (Slaughter and Rhoades 2004). Overall, these frameworks elucidate university intentions to contribute more directly and significantly to socio-economic development and sustainability through creating partnerships (Bekele and Ofoyuru 2021).

Epistemic cultures, “those sets of practices, arrangements and mechanisms” (Knorr Cetina 2007: 363) linked to knowledge co-creation, consolidate arguments about emerging partnerships. Knowledge cultures implicate na-

tional and international regulations and policies, higher education regulatory bodies, funding regimes, and the media whereas “macro-epistemic” cultures refer to professional associations, publishers (including editors and reviewers), professional networks, and quality assurance agencies (Knorr Cetina 2007). These three cultures are relevant to explore how and to what extent universities partner with larger bodies of knowledge production, consumption, and regulation (Bekele and Ofoyuru 2021).

However, some points need to be made regarding the theoretical frameworks. Firstly, the frameworks focus on explaining the primarily economic rationales behind emerging university-society partnerships. The nature and extent of strategic partnerships are not explicitly accounted for. Secondly, the frameworks were developed within the Western higher education and society contexts, thus their relevance and fecundity to African realities and contexts remain unclear. Consequently, philosophical and theoretical frameworks which contextualise partner and partnership characteristics to African realities are needed. Cossa (2020) argues that “how we understand human [beings] has implications on how we relate with, and treat, the human, thus having consequences on theories, policies and practices directed to the human” (p. 32). Moreover,

Theories explain human phenomena from the corresponding lenses of the epistemological conceptualization of *human*. Policies, on the other hand, address issues of human condition calling for social and global justice and interrogating socio-cultural power from the corresponding ontological and axiological principles; practices birth, nurture, and promote educational and socio-cultural services intended to serve the human as understood in its corresponding context. (p. 32)

In this study, we will employ uBuntu and Cosmo-uBuntu, an exterior to modernity theorising, as contextually-derived philosophical and theoretical frameworks, in order to inspire African higher education towards contextual relevance and significance. Deriving from the African cosmology embedded in uBuntu, Cosmo-uBuntu embraces a non-discriminatory and non-hierarchical understanding of humans and presupposes a voluntary embracing of uBuntu as a foundational value system in our participation in planetary conviviality, that is, it does not force universality; therefore,

partnerships inspired by a Cosmo-uBuntu theoretical framework ought to infuse the beyond-modernist-ethics perspective that “humans are connected not only to humans but also to their ancestors, land, and the overall cosmos” (Cossa et al. 2020: 756; Cossa 2019). Consequently, a Cosmo-uBuntu theoretical framework and an uBuntu philosophical foundation offer a contextual grounding in justice beyond Western theoretical frameworks.

## Methodology

This study explores the nature of strategic university-society partnerships (SUSP) in Africa by conducting a review of the literature on educational partnerships in Africa and an analysis of strategic plans of leading organisations in the higher education space in Africa. The review is vital to operationalise constructs/concepts, identify the challenges in our current knowledge, and synthesise new perspectives for the study. We also analyse the post-2015 strategic plans of select organisations and universities for contextualising emerging partnerships in the light of universities’ definition of *society* to include global, continental, national, and local actors (Bekele 2018; Frondizi et al. 2019; Bekele and Ofoyuru 2021) and for identifying organisational goals, priorities and implementation mechanisms in their strategic plans (Allison and Kaye 2011; Hinton 2012; Addie 2019). We focus our analysis on leading continental bodies such as the African Union (AU), the Association of African Universities (AAU), and the Association for the Development of Education in Africa (ADEA) because they are positioned to directly contribute to educational development in the continent. We provide an overview of the current strategic plans of 30 universities from 14 countries comprising South Africa, eSwatini, Namibia, Zambia and Zimbabwe (in Southern Africa), Egypt and Libya (in Northern Africa), Ethiopia, Mauritius, Rwanda, Sudan, Tanzania (in Eastern Africa), and Ghana and Nigeria (in Western Africa). The overview aims to identify the policy features of emerging university-society partnerships in Africa and includes interrogating the ‘what, how, and why dimensions’ of policy/strategic plans (Marshall, 2000; Walker, Rahman and Cave 2001; Olssen et al. 2004; Wageenaar 2007; Cardno 2018).

Qualitative content analysis (Bengtsson 2016) of the strategic plans focuses on identifying rationales, strategies, and challenges of partnerships. To minimise bias in policy analysis, description of evidence needs to be provided first without resorting to interpretation (Olssen et al. 2004; Wageenaar

2007; Cardno 2018). Although strategic plans reflect current and future positionings of organisations (Pirtea et al. 2009; Allison et al. 2011; Ad-die 2018), we do not assume that they represent an organisation's objective reality, nor do they necessarily equate actual practice. Instead, they reveal shared understandings and aspirations of educational stakeholders to meet their goals (Bekele and Ofoyuru 2021). The literature review presented below also informs our overall analysis of features of university-society partnerships.

### **University-Society Partnerships**

University-society partnerships can potentially affect teaching, research, and service functions of universities. However, before presenting a review of the existing partnerships, it will be helpful to understand what the term “partnership” means. Scholars conceptualise “partnership” and what it entails in different ways. Furthermore, the use of terms like “educational” or “academic” partnerships (Cox-Petersen 2011) or “research” partnerships (Obamba and Mwema 2009) reminds readers of the various dimensions of partnerships. In general, scholars perceive partnerships as the collaboration between different partners who want to achieve a common goal by sharing resources, information, interactions, and activities (Jassawalla and Sashittal 1998, as cited in Buys and Bursnell 2007; Cox-Petersen 2011). For other researchers, partnerships enhance scope for capacity building and new ways of thinking that emerge from the interaction of multiple sources (Obamba & Mwema 2009). Irrespective of what partnerships mean to the scholars, they agree that partnerships should be (1) mutually beneficial and (2) oriented toward engaging with the community. Cox-Petersen (2011) clarifies that ideal partnerships involve collaborative decision-making in which one party does not dictate what the other party can do. Buys and Bursnell (2007) highlight the importance of gearing universities' policies and practices toward sustained community engagement for overcoming economic and social challenges. In their discussion of university-community partnerships in American higher education, Harkavy and Wiewel (1995) point to the evolving need for universities to emerge from their cloisters and become civic institutions that solve societal problems. Perhaps the most challenging aspect of defining and understanding partnerships is to understand the essence of the whole partnership from the synergy of the different components (Cox 2000).

For our purposes, university-society partnerships refer to any intentional agreements between universities and local, national, regional/continental, and global partners, which may be other universities, countries and or organisations, to work toward common goals by sharing resources and information, improving and enhancing educational and research facilities, extending support for community engagement, and creating opportunities for knowledge creation and dissemination. We assume that the premise for any partnership is a non-hegemonic symmetrical relationship in which partners work collaboratively rather than one partner dominating the other. Therefore, transparency and mutual respect for each other's strengths are critical for developing successful partnerships.

Having operationalised the term “partnership,” we will present in the following section a brief review of the literature in order to ascertain the ramifications of university-society partnerships. Therefore, this section explores extant literature to investigate (1) the role of higher education in achieving educational goals; (2) the rationale behind university-society partnerships; (3) the ensuing benefits of university-society partnerships; and (4) the issues or problems that stifle realisation of partnership goals. The review provides a more nuanced understanding of the strategic positionings of African universities in the partnerships and their power to negotiate with Western universities.

The primary rationale behind university-society partnerships is to achieve developmental and educational goals such as access, equity, and research prospects (Ogachi 2009). The COVID-19 pandemic presents both a new challenge and an opportunity to understand such partnerships as the added dimensions (e.g., digital divide, connectivity, technology, etc.) require a more nuanced analysis. The chasm between the demand for students' learning needs and the availability of academic services and resources, especially during emergencies, fragilities, and unprecedented times (e.g., wars, national disasters, and pandemics), calls governments and educational institutions to rethink their educational policies and goals. To mitigate this demand and improve how educational institutions respond to the needs of communities, there has been an increase in the number of partnerships between higher education institutions and governments, Non-Governmental Organisations (NGOs), general businesses, and other educational institutions (Sewankambo et al. 2015; Kot 2016; Yarmoshuk et al. 2017).

An analysis of the role of higher education in the improvement of commu-



nities in Africa might be best conducted through the lens of the contextually embedded African philosophical and theoretical notions of *uBuntu* and *Cosmo-uBuntu*, respectively, which stress interconnectedness of human existence (Chitumba 2013; Cossa 2020; Waghid 2020). Viewed through such a lens, higher education and higher education partnerships will enable partners to engage in social action without the limitations imposed by the concept of “otherness” (Waghid 2020; Cossa et al. 2020). Western and African philosophical tenets can enrich partnerships and allow partners to work in synergy by focusing on empowerment, collectivism, and interdependence. Ironically, these values have been suppressed due to the Western overemphasis on competition and individualism (Chitumba 2013; Waghid 2020).

### ***Benefits of University-Society Partnerships***

According to Kot (2014), university-society partnerships can yield both institutional and personal benefits. Institutional benefits such as building capacity, increasing academic effectiveness, and internationalisation are critical for building better infrastructure, incorporating effective management, diversifying course offerings, creating better jobs offerings for academic staff, and increasing the opportunity for knowledge production (Kot 2014). These, in turn, improve academic efficiency and offer higher education institutions more recognition. Personal benefits encompass knowledge of innovative teaching-learning practices, better guidance for research, scope for networking, learning about different cultures and languages, and increased access to resources and funding.

Machima et al. (2020) posit that research partnerships, specifically, can bolster economic, social, and cultural prosperity. With proper impetus, such collaborative practices can lead to the development of local communities by creating the scope for knowledge production (Obamba et al. 2013; Kot 2016). Research indicates that when “Mode 2” context-based knowledge generation complements “Mode 1” discipline-based knowledge generation, then universities can make their research more relevant for the local communities (Gibbons et al. 1994; Waghid 2002). Therefore, when universities incorporate “Mode 2” knowledge production, they facilitate the involvement of local communities by prioritising issues pertinent to them and increasing access to information (Waghid 2002). In fact, African institutions can moderate the gap between the Global North and Global South by

mobilising knowledge production at the local and regional levels (Obamba 2013). One evidence of North-South collaborations that aims to mitigate the gap in knowledge production is the Carnegie African Diaspora Fellowship Program (CADFP), which boasts of the following:

CADFP Fellows have participated in 385 capacity building projects hosted by faculty at 138 higher education institutions in six partner countries in sub-Saharan Africa: Ghana, Nigeria, Kenya, Tanzania, South Africa and Uganda. During fellowships that range from 14-90 days, Fellows collaborate with hosts on curriculum co-development, graduate student teaching and mentoring, and collaborative research. In addition to the regular fellowship structure of one Fellow per project, the program offers multi-institutional and cohort fellowships. 118 Fellows received alumni fellowships. (Carnegie Corporation of New York 2019)

Another major advantage of partnerships is the provision for sharing resources to meet the needs of local communities. In the process, universities can also mobilise local resources that benefit the communities and eradicate the supremacy of the industrialised nations (Machimana et al. 2020; Obamba 2013). One such partnership between the University of Pretoria and a secondary school in South Africa, called the Flourishing Learning Youth (FLY), validates how collaborations can be mutually beneficial: while the school became aware of the underutilised resources that were locally available and also got access to additional resources and knowledge, the university gained a better understanding of the local communities (Machimana et al. 2020).

Furthermore, researchers claim that increased awareness of university-society partnerships can motivate teachers and students to get more actively involved in community service and poverty reduction efforts (Machimana et al. 2020). Similarly, Kot (2014) found that the perceived benefits of university-society partnerships, such as better funding, research opportunities, professional development, and expert guidance for doctorate students, encourage active participation from administrators, staff, and students. Hence, it seems that the success of these partnerships is not only mediated by the policies and agreements but also by the awareness of the roles each

member can play and the potential benefits those partnerships bring for the stakeholders.

The financial benefits offered by partnerships also lead to liaison with international educational institutions, increased access to research and expertise, general support for policy making, professional development, and the potential to enhance revenue for the partner institutions. In the process, partnerships can create opportunities to share costs for infrastructure development (Kot 2016). The success of such collaborations can be exemplified by more than ten years of financial support by the Swedish International Development Cooperation Agency (SIDA) to Makerere University in Uganda for enhancing health research capacity (Sewankambo et al. 2015). An added benefit was the recognition gained by research centres and the opportunity to join networks that disseminate intellectual and social capital to the larger society, thus building the bulwark for international partnerships and influencing policy-making decisions that are based on evidence (Sewankambo et al. 2015).

Thus, the literature review reveals that university-society partnerships can yield institutional as well as personal benefits (Kot 2014). For the universities and research centres, such partnerships bring recognition, enhance scope for funds and resource sharing, local and regional communities to get involved in knowledge production, and influence policymaking (Kot 2014; Sewankambo et al. 2015). They also allow African university students to undertake research work, acquire doctoral and postdoctoral training, become part of global networks that share information, and contribute to intellectual capital building (Sewankambo et al. 2015). In essence, international university-society partnerships can be mutually beneficial for the partners. However, in reality, university-society partnerships do not always yield the desired results for the partners.

### ***Issues Concerning Partnerships***

International partnerships can increase access to education and augment social development in the African context. Yet, asymmetrical partnerships thwart the realisation of the developmental and academic outcomes. An analysis of power dynamics unveils the ambiguity in stakeholders' roles and the processes through which partnerships operate, making it apparent that African academics are often relegated to a secondary role or dependency to their foreign counterparts in collaborative partnerships (Obamba 2013).

A review of the literature reveals issues such as the pervading influence of colonialism, overbearing social and cultural influences of U.S. and European countries on the local people, brain-drain, lack of proper infrastructure (Obamba 2013; Semali, Baker and Freer 2013) and myriad forms of “partnerships” that often conceal more than they reveal about what, if mutually beneficial, was actually accomplished through such collaborations.

African higher education carries the legacy of colonialism, which is evident in the fact that the European Union (EU) has a major say in the alliances formed between African and European countries and African countries model their universities after the educational systems of European countries that formerly colonised them (Tobenkin 2016). In addition, there is a growing number of educational partnerships between African governments and universities with the U.S. government and institutions. Researchers demonstrate that African universities often favour European cultures and values which are reflected in the subjects taught, themes, communication patterns, and pedagogy (Tedrow and Mabokela 2007; Semali, Baker and Freer 2013). Supremacy of the European universities over the African universities is also evident in the medium of instruction, which is primarily conducted through French, English, and Portuguese (Semali, Baker and Freer 2013). The pervading influences of colonialism, imperialism, and modernity have made it difficult to take any radical transformative social action in African higher education (Cossa 2018b). These practices reveal that the adoption of partnership models that evolved out of the necessity to counteract the power dynamics of the colonial era, fail to materialise the expected outcomes (Samoff and Carrol 2004; Obamba and Mwema 2009). Consequently, Cossa (2018b) stresses the importance of democratic policy making, independent knowledge production, incorporating voices of the local people in partnership negotiations, and financial independence in order to minimise the negative impact of unequal partnerships on local people.

International educational partnerships increase access to education; however, they also gradually change the nature and weaken the dissemination of knowledge production (Zezeza 2005). With increasing numbers of partnerships between universities and corporations, knowledge is being used for commercial gains rather than for social development (Naidoo 2003). Moreover, privileged students and specific sections of society have an increased access to funding and knowledge (Naidoo 2003). As a result, globalisation

is perpetuating strains of colonisation and Western hegemony in African higher education research and practice. According to Semali et al (2013) this market-driven economy also influences perceptions, relationships, and funding in partnerships because such economies favour the private sector and lead to a reduced government support. Consequently, neo-liberal policies and globalisation have both led to a reduction in government funding for higher education since private sector companies extend monetary support to the institutions (Semali, Baker and Freer 2013).

This lack of financial support from the government, however, has left higher education “high and dry” in meeting learner needs and research goals (Semali et al. 2013). Despite the mutual interests of furthering research endeavours, the lack of funding and of supporting infrastructure have worsened the scope for conducting or publishing research work; this is evident in the lack of scientific equipment, technological tools, books, and research expertise (Semali et al. 2013). Studies focusing on health partnerships also show that conditions stipulated for funding along with incommensurate priorities and attitudes between partners contribute to asymmetric power dynamics (Yarmoshuk et al. 2020). Furthermore, the lack of adequate remunerations and research opportunities force scholars to migrate to other places for better career prospects; consequently, these so-called “brain drain” trends produce adverse effects on the communities’ economic and social development (Semali et al. 2013).

Generally, the scientific alliances with international countries show that African universities get to play marginal roles that seldom support their research abilities or bring them recognition (Obamba 2013). Some of the partnerships reveal that either the agreements are unilateral and serve the interests of Western countries or they predominantly emphasise specific areas of research and development while ignoring others (Obamba 2013). Mwangi argues that the Majority World countries (i.e., countries that are most populated and often referred to as the developing nations) who are the recipients of aid, are expected to be mere spectators to what the Minority World (i.e., countries that are commonly referred to as developed nations) doles out to them in the name of the internationalisation of higher education (Mwangi 2017). Additionally, Mwangi (2017) finds that the students and faculty of the Majority World do not get enough opportunity to express their viewpoints and concerns. Dean et al.’s (2015) study also reveals that there is a general lack of discussion about the stakes of the low-income countries in such collaborative endeavours.

Historically, South Africa has been at the forefront among African countries regarding partnerships, collaborations and memorandums of understanding (MOUs) between universities and other entities, especially industry (Kruss and Letseka 2005). Despite the push towards such collaborations, there is not enough information to gauge the success of such initiatives. Moreover, universities have been found wanting in transfer of knowledge, information, technology, and expertise from “the classroom to the boardroom,” thus unable to play a more meaningful role in global advancement, technological development, and social equity (Kruss and Letseka 2005). To alleviate such status quo, Kruss and Letseka (2005) suggest that there should be more fruitful and effective research collaborations, joint partnerships, technological interchange and mutual research agendas between universities and industry in South Africa.

In general, an absence of transparency between the stakeholders further complicates the understanding of partner relationships; lack of clarity and veiled agendas exacerbate unequal power relations (Kaguhangire-Barifaijo and Namara 2012); lack of communication between administrators and students often leads to misconceptions about the benefits of partnerships and the proper utilisation of available resources (Kot 2014); and, given that the major thrust of partnerships is geared toward administrators and staff rather than toward students, post-graduate students often get left out in research endeavours (Kot 2014).

To sum up, existing partnerships are still based on asymmetrical power relations established during the colonial era (Dean et al. 2015). Despite embracing a partnership paradigm that supposedly alleviates the problems of power inequalities, the more powerful countries exert “intellectual domination” over African nations (Semali et al. 2013), resulting in a dominance of Western values, beliefs, and languages in educational and research endeavours. Western hegemony also affects knowledge production and results in the marginalisation of the needs of African communities (Obamba et al. 2013). Consequently, the existing system often emphasises specific disciplines while side-lining others (Obamba 2013). Such negative impacts lead to a “brain drain” from African countries to the West, and thwart any efforts for sustainable growth (Obamba and Mwema 2009; Obamba 2013). Furthermore, such flawed partnerships generate a vicious cycle, whereby the universities and communities continue to depend on foreign powers for their sustainability (Obamba 2013). Since local and regional actors are

sometimes unaware of the available resources, the effectiveness of partnerships is also compromised. Finally, the lack of transparency between universities and partner organisations and between universities' departments, faculty, and actors severely hinders the proper utilisation of facilities (Kot 2014).

These gaps reveal the need for reconceptualising how existing partnerships are formulated. Furthermore, it is still unclear if there is a discrepancy between the agreements and their implementation. Hence, an analysis of university-society strategic partnership plans may shed light on the reciprocity of the partner relationships and their implications for Africa.

### **Strategic Planning and University-Society Partnerships**

In this section we briefly examine features of university-society engagements as revealed in current continental and university strategic plans. As universities define society to include global, continental, national and local actors, we analyse the post-2015 strategic plans of the AU, the AAU, and ADEA and follow with a brief overview of emerging university partnerships revealed in the current strategic plans of 30 universities.

#### ***Continental Strategies***

According to their mission statements (see Table 1), the three organisations aspire to contribute to educational development in Africa. The AU is an intergovernmental continental body tasked to facilitate socio-economic development in its 55 member countries. In collaboration with ministries of education and training, the AU developed the Continental Education Strategy for Africa (CESA), which is chosen for this study due to its scope of application and currency. The AAU specialises in higher education development and harmonisation in the continent, whereas ADEA is a partnership arrangement between African education and training ministries, bilateral and multilateral organisations, researchers, the private sector, and civil society organisations. All three organisations seem to consider partnerships as effective strategies for meeting their goals.

**Table 1: Continental Organisations’ Missions and Duration of Their Strategic Plans**

<b>Organisation</b>	<b>Clientele</b>	<b>Strategic plan duration</b>	<b>Mission</b>
AAU	400 higher education institutions from 46 countries	2020–2025	To enhance the quality and relevance of higher education in Africa and strengthen its contribution to Africa’s development.
ADEA	55 ministries of education in Africa	2018–2022	To contribute to empowering African countries in order to develop education and training systems that respond to their emergent needs and drive Africa’s sustainable socio-economic transformation.
AU	55 African ministries of education and training	2016–2025	Reorienting Africa’s education and training systems in order to meet the knowledge, competencies, skills, innovation, and creativity required to nurture African core values and promote sustainable development at the national, sub-regional and continental levels

According to the AAU strategic plan (AAU 2020), one of the objectives of the AAU is to “improve collaboration with African and international development partners” (p. 10). The AAU aspires to facilitate and ensure higher education contributions to the global and continental development goals. African higher education’s contribution to “the achievement of international development agendas including the SDGs, Agenda 2063, CESA, and STISA, lies at the heart of the goal of the current Strategic Plan” (AAU 2020: 2). This strategic plan portrays the AAU as the main advocate for and convener of all stakeholders in higher education in Africa and reiterates the AAU’s role of coordinating the higher education cluster of the CESA.

The significance and relevance of partnerships to meet AAU’s vision are explained in the strategic plan (AAU 2020). In order to enhance inter-institutional collaboration and networking, the strategic plan identified “per-



centage increase in institutional collaborations and partnerships among African higher education institutions including mobility of students and staff” (AAU 2020: 8) as an indicator. To strengthen the capacity of the organisation and its member universities to deliver on their mandates, the “quality of relationships and interdependence between the academia, policy actors, and development actors including the private sector” is chosen as a performance indicator (p. 31). The private sector is also identified as an important partner to the AAU and its members on matters linked to the investment in higher education development. Overall, the AAU aspires to contribute to higher education development and harmonisation through partnerships that engage continental and global public and private actors, with a focus on intra-Africa partnerships. However, it is unclear how and to what extent partnerships draw on regional realities and cultures.

Being itself the result of partnerships among continental and global actors, ADEA (2018) likewise aspires to contribute to educational development in Africa. One of its strategic pillars is “network fostering collaboration and coordination across stakeholders and national borders” (p. 3) through ICQN, Inter-Country Quality Nodes. Of the eight strategic objectives identified in the strategic plan, “high-level stakeholder forums” takes the third place. ADEA’s participation in events at regional and continental levels is a manifestation of its high-level convening power. Stronger engagement with the AU, African governments, development partners, the private sector, civil society organisations, and financial partners including the Africa Development Bank (ADB) is considered a strategic choice.

The Continental Education Strategy for Africa is consistent with the Agenda 2063 (African Union Commission 2015) and the Common African Position on the Post-2015 Development Agenda and is endorsed by the World Education Forum (WEF). CESA seeks active partnerships for the mobilisation of “financial, human and technical resources within national, regional and continental coalitions for education, science and technology” (AU n.d.: 5). Envisioned in the Strategic Plan are partnerships and networks between the private sector and regional and continental networks such as the AAU, ADEA, African Network for Agriculture, Agroforestry and Natural Resources Education (ANAFE), African Women in Agricultural Research and Development (AWARD), Africa Network Campaign on Education for All (ANCEFA), African Union Foundation (AUF), etc. Public-private partnerships are entrusted for “providing direct financial support to public

institutions, granting scholarships, providing mentorship and internships opportunities, supporting the management of levies to support education and training, and contributing to special funds for education and training” (AU n.d.: 33).

Partnerships are considered vital strategies for meeting certain goals and objectives. A “coalition of actors to enable a credible participatory and solid partnership between government, civil society and the private sector” (AU n.d.: 8) is the strategy identified for meeting one of the seven strategic pillars, strengthening institutional capacity. Moreover, the twelfth strategic objective concerns the formation of “a coalition of stakeholders” (p. 9) to coordinate the implementation of the CESA. The role of the coalition includes mapping out key stakeholders based on their comparative advantages, identifying and developing strategic initiatives, identifying and mobilising champions to leverage priority areas of the strategy, and recognising champions and publicising their achievements. Moreover, partnerships serve as governance means to implement the education strategy at the continental, regional, and national levels. Thus, “financing, governance and partnerships” is one of the ten priority areas identified for post-2015 education and a committee of ten Heads of State and government officials was established, along with a governing body comprising representatives from education ministries, other ministries, national experts, and development agencies.

Overall, ADEA, the AAU, and the AU explicitly stated the roles partnerships are envisioned to play in educational development in Africa. The following points seem to comprise the core (i.e., theoretical and methodological) features of strategic partnerships: (a) the interchangeable use of terms such as networks, partnerships, relationships, cooperation, and collaborations, which casts an assumption of indistinctiveness in the nature of these concepts; (b) the use of business and metaphorical language such as stakeholders, partners, players, actors, and members, which reveals a favouring of corporate culture when relating with humans engaged in the partnership; (c) the use of value-based terms such as credible, participatory, solid, comparable advantage, quality relationships, and interdependence to refer to the nature or quality of partnerships, which presupposes an assumed implied standard; (d) the aspiration to create partnerships at the local/provincial, national, regional (i.e., in the five economic regions of Africa), continental, and global levels; (e) the engaging of governmental,

intergovernmental, civil society organisations, and the private sector; and (f) the rationale of mobilising material, financial, technologic, and human resources needed for educational development in Africa.

Several challenges are not treated or covered in the strategic plans. For instance, the nature or quality of strategic partnerships that are responsive to and reflect African culture are not interrogated, the power dynamics linked to decision making in intra- and inter-Africa partnerships is missing, and the partnership features outlined above are instituted without consideration of crisis situations such as the Covid-19 pandemic. Our study aspires to problematise these issues and contributes towards understanding the core features of strategic university-society partnerships in Africa in times of crisis and beyond. Therefore, our analysis is preceded by an overview of how and to what extent select African universities are poised to engage in meaningful partnerships with their respective communities and society at large.

### ***Institutional Strategies***

A research project on emerging university-society engagements and linkages in Africa (Bekele and Ofoyuru 2021) reveals several findings. The study sampled 30 universities from fourteen countries from Southern Africa (South Africa, eSwatini, Namibia, Zambia and Zimbabwe), Northern Africa (Egypt and Libya), Eastern Africa (Ethiopia, Mauritius, Rwanda, Sudan, Tanzania), and Western Africa (Ghana and Nigeria). Qualitative and quantitative analyses of the current strategic plans of these thirty universities provide findings relevant for further problematising strategic partnerships in Africa.

The following three major rationales are provided for university engagement in strategic planning: (1) 73% of the universities claim that their strategic plans are developed in order to improve their relevance and significance to emerging local, national, regional, and international needs and challenges; (2) 30% use strategic plans to identify strategic pillars for focus amid limited financial, material, human, and technological resources, and global competitions; and (3) an analysis of manifest and latent content of all 30 strategic plans reveals such strategic pillars as quality of education (100%), impactful research (93%), innovation and technology (87%), partnerships (70%), governance (50%), campus development (43%), interna-

tionalisation (43%), and income generation (40%).

Overall, the analysis offers the following lessons (Bekele and Ofoyuru 2021): through creating partnerships, the studied universities seem to position themselves to engage with their societies more directly and significantly; partners include public and private actors at the local, national, continental, and global levels; partnerships are justified from the point of view of resource mobilisation and capacity building; areas of partnerships include university primary, secondary and third missions (education, research, and service, respectively); and, the strategic plans promote Western conceptions of higher education and development as standards for emulation and inspiration. It is unclear how and to what extent university-society partnerships draw on or are informed by African contextual realities, including culture. A further problematisation and operationalisation of SUSP to African contexts needs to consider these conceptual and methodological challenges.

## **Discussion of the Results**

The present study is organised around answering the overarching question: What are the theoretical and methodological features and attributes of strategic international university-society partnerships in Africa? This question was informed by the lack of clarity about how and to what extent university-society partnerships draw on, or are informed by, African contextual realities. We conjectured that the modernistic perception of higher education and Western conceptualisations and models of university-society partnerships dominate global discourse and practice, thus partly hinder the creation of contextual university-society partnerships in Africa. It was our hope that, if supported, this conjecture would inspire new conceptual models for university-society partnerships that defy hegemonic discourse and practice in favour of contextual models and practices.

The literature review and the policy overview seem to indicate a lack of a clear conceptualisation of SUSP in Africa. It is unclear what strategic, contextual, or meaningful partnerships mean as well as the conditions and factors that affect them. This conceptual challenge is a roadblock to build, scale up, sustain, and assess partnerships in an age of increased globalisation, internationalisation, and the pandemic and beyond. Drawing on the literature review, policy reviews, and the theoretical and philosophical accounts, we suggest a generic conceptual model of SUSP (see Figure 1), albeit our

cognisance of the fact that such a framework is also foreign to the African context. Therefore, African universities must use caution when using this model, by considering it as a source of inspiration and perhaps guidance as they conceptualise and practice partnerships.

The conceptual framework identifies attributes of strategic partnerships as well as its various elements or dimensions. Accordingly, partnerships are “strategic” if there is an alignment with institutional, national, regional, and global policies, strategies, laws, and guidelines; dedicated offices, facilities, and or units within universities exist to initiate, build and sustain partnerships; reciprocity, mutual benefit, and fair decision-making power is ensured; a shared basis of understanding, clarity of purpose, approach, strategy, and outcome is ensured; a real sense of ownership and responsibility is created; a shared governance (democratic, transparent, accountable) prevails; scalability and sustainability (some projects can be of having short life cycles, but the ideas and logics of partnership should endure) are ensured; monitoring and evaluation strategies are identified a priori; and reliable and predictable resource base are identified. These are the salient qualities, attributes or characteristics of SUSP.

We conjectured that strategic partnerships by their nature have contextual saliency and hence are meaningful and satisfying to all partners. Cosmo-uBuntu’s non-discriminatory and non-hierarchical understanding of human beings and uBuntu’s foundational value system in our participation in planetary conviviality, without forcing universality (Cossa 2019; Cossa et al. 2020) could offer a contextual grounding in justice beyond Western theoretical frameworks and asymmetrical power relationships between partners.

The conceptual framework maintains that strategic partnerships are omnipresent, i.e., affecting all major functions of universities. Therefore, partnerships can percolate into a university’s scholarship of teaching, research, and service, thus engendering meaningful impact and allowing for optimisation and sustainability. As per the dictates of the Quintuple helix (Carayyanis and Campbell 2012) and epistemic cultures, macro-epistemics, and knowledge cultures (Knorr Cetina 2007), partners could be local and international private and public higher education institutions, schools, government organisations, media, publishers, professional associations, and other organisations having educational mandates and interests.

Rationales and goals of strategic partnerships include resource (e.g., financial, human, technological, material) mobilisation and optimisation; source of research and teaching agendas; internationalisation (e.g., of curricula and mobility and/or exchange of staff and/or students and/or faculty); social relevance and significance of higher education through quality service delivery; faculty professional development and institutional capacity building; social and academic capital; knowledge co-creation and dissemination; community service; meeting global, continental, regional, and national education ambitions; and participatory, diversified, multi-stakeholder governance, all these could improve university competitive advantage. These rationales and goals are consistent with the principles of Modes 2 and 3 research, entrepreneurial university models, and academic capitalism, which are discussed in the theory section above.

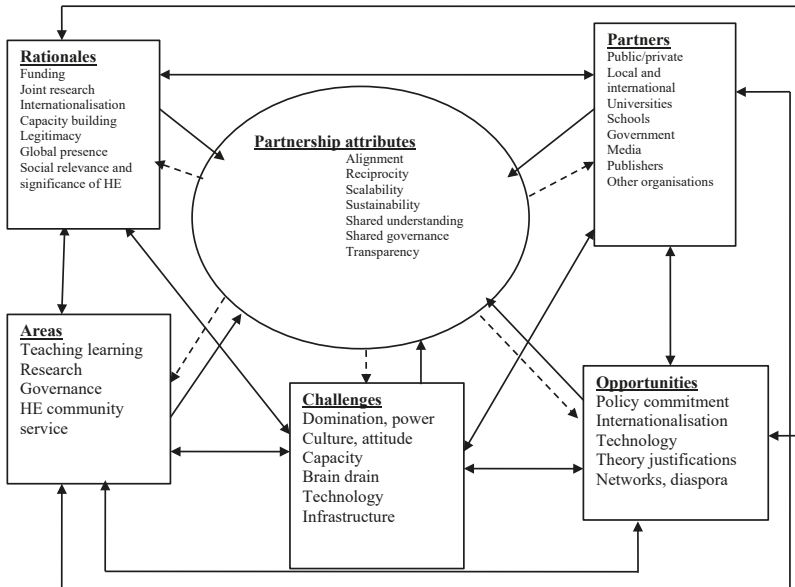
There are multiple opportunities for building and sustaining strategic partnerships: the availability of theoretical justifications for emerging university-society partnerships (entrepreneurial university models, Mode 2 and Mode 3 research, academic capitalism, the helices models, and epistemic cultures); the availability of institutional, national, continental, and global policy and strategy that encourage and support partnerships at various levels (e.g. the UN 2030 Agenda and the AU Agenda 2063); the ever increasing internationalisation ambitions of institutions and countries; developing/improving technology infrastructure and Internet connectivity; increasing attention being given to online engagement and presence; and university revisioning of their missions in order to better demonstrate their relevance and significance to society.

However, several formidable challenges exist that could put to test the successfulness of SUSP. Colonial legacy; asymmetrical power relations between Western and African universities; intellectual/financial/technological/material domination by the West; Western science conceptions about say the universalisation, objectivity, quality education and development; institutional and national cultures, attitudes and values; brain drain; resource scarcity, dependence on an unreliable source; a lack of shared understanding of strategic partnerships, their implementation and assessment; the limited institutional capacity and experience; unreliable Internet connectivity and infrastructure; and a lack of transparency and accountability are some of the most salient challenges. It takes time, expertise, political willingness, and commitment to overcome these challenges.

In Figure 1, the double-headed arrows indicate that there is a complex relationship among the various elements in that each of them affects the other and vice-versa. On the other hand, if a noticeable progress is made in the partnership engagements, all elements may be positively affected, as indicated by the dashed arrows which spread from the centre. Generally, building SUSP heavily depends on the simultaneous and systematic consideration of all five elements or dimensions.

Moreover, this model ought to be used along with the critical analysis of power dynamics (Cossa, 2008) inherent in each aspect of the model. Part of the aforementioned caution is drawn from the overall context in which this study is situated – the university as a modernist enterprise that exists within the African context. Earlier we stated that, against the backdrop of a higher education fashioned after modernity, the study aspires to contribute toward a deeper understanding of the strategic positioning of African universities in the highly competitive and modernistic world of higher education. It is evident in the literature and in our policy analysis that African universities' reliance on strategic planning, built with a functionalist theoretical framework and rooted in the three tenets of modernity—i.e., personal individuation, structural differentiation, and cultural rationalisation,—as a blueprint for effective partnerships with fellow universities, the immediate communities around them, and with the overall society, begs the question of how and to what extent university-society partnerships draw on or are informed by African contextual realities. Schmidt (2010) argues that “modernisation, the change resulting in modernity ... once set in motion, social change becomes endemic, favouring institutions that are both adaptable to and stimulate further change” (2010: 513). This suggests that partnerships between a university fashioned after modernity and a society fashioned after African ontology, epistemology, and axiology face the challenge of incommensurability and of imbalanced power dynamics from the onset, thus having implications as to whose knowledge, values, and reality get transferred and becoming prominent in shaping such partnerships.

**Figure 1:**  
**Conceptual Model of Strategic University-Society Partnerships**



*Source: Authors' construction based on the analysis*

Given that partnerships are permeated with power dynamics, we asked, “how does power dynamics or discourse manifest in international partnerships?” Drawing from a study conducted with international organisations such as UNESCO, the World Trade Organisations (WTO), the World Bank (WB), the International Monetary Fund (IMF); regional institutions in Africa such as the Association of African Universities, the then New Partnership for African Development (NEPAD) now African Union Development Agency (AUDA-NEPAD), the Southern African Development Community (SADC) and local governments, Cossa (2016) argues that partnerships presuppose negotiations and involve power dynamics that can be understood through a pentamerous instrument comprised of the following five qualities of power (see Table 2): hermeneutical, informational, manipulative, monetary, and regulatory. Therefore, partnerships between African universities and African communities as well as African universities and societal actors



at the local and global spheres would benefit from a deep understanding of power dynamics on the negotiation table because such understanding provides insight into the nuanced forms of power inherent in partnerships. Ultimately, the establishment of equitable partnerships depends largely on the success of partners in positioning themselves as equitably essential at the negotiating table.

**Table 2: Summary Definition of the Five Qualities of Power**

<b>Qualities of Power</b>	<b>Definition</b>
<b>Hermeneutical</b>	Interpreter’s proximity to the authorial intent of a given text
<b>Informational</b>	The ability to generate and disseminate what is considered true and valuable information at a given time
<b>Manipulative</b>	The ability to persuade another to adopt a perception and behaviour that benefits the persuader
<b>Monetary</b>	The influence one exerts on another through the ability to provide monetary rewards or incentives
<b>Regulatory</b>	The ability to make rules or give directives that are perceived as binding

*Source: Cossa (2008: 107)*

To highlight the origins of the thinking behind partnerships we have asked, “how do African universities conceptualise partnerships?” Our analysis shows that the strategic plans of the AAU, AU (through CESA), and ADEA favour a modernist modernisation and human capital orientation over African philosophical and cosmological orientations. Consequently, in such documents, communities are viewed as commodities, sources of human capital, and needing empowerment. Incidentally, the AAU was an avid opposer of the GATS and pushed the commodification of higher education (AAU 2005). A modernistic orientation places a huge burden on organisations such as the AAU, AU, and ADEA whose organisational structures and institutional cultures are tied to Western models at the expense of African models, from their inception. For instance, the inception of the AAU was

influenced by the International Association of Universities (IAU), an entity created under the auspices of UNESCO, as it assisted in planning and making administrative arrangements for the founding meeting in Khartoum, Sudan, in September 1963, and was invited to cooperate with the Interim Committee that was set up to draft a constitution for the AAU (AAU 2020). The aforementioned is evidence that system transfer and relevant model transfer was at play and the involvement of the IAU constituted an infusion of favourable power dynamics, particularly hermeneutical (at the policy and legislative levels) and informational, for non-African partners as the IAU served as a non-African expert entity shaping the future of higher education in Africa. This is typical of African institutions, to seek and engage Western expertise, since African organisational structures and *modus operandi* are fashioned after colonial ones thus remain committed to modernity.

Moreover, in order to understand the rationales, motives, purposes, and goals for partnerships with international entities we posed the question, “why do African universities aspire to establish partnerships with international actors such as Western universities?” These questions are a recognition of the preference for Western universities as partners and the existing partnerships between African universities such as the case of the African Human Rights Master’s programme (Heyns 2005) and the project linking universities and the so-called marginalised communities (Kruss and Gastrow 2015). Moreover, our analysis shows that African universities prefer partnerships with Western universities because of the perception that these partnerships bring benefits such as research collaborations, publications, exchange of ideas and expertise, and grants (Dean et al. 2015; Molsi-France and Makoni 2020).

## **Conclusion**

In this article we call for a more nuanced problematising and operationalising of strategic partnerships in terms of their contextuality to Africa. Given Africa’s history of colonialism, imperialism, and corresponding “neo” forms, African universities ought to pay closer attention to context rather than to global competition. Therefore, it is imperative that their educational visions, research, and action, all find meaning in their call to participate in the enhancement of quality human life on this planet. This call ought to be fundamentally conceived and perceived as an extension of our own humanity, our uBuntu (Cossa 2018b).

Drawing on uBuntu constitutes an essential starting point in conceptualising and operationalising partnerships in a manner that is contextual to Africa, since uBuntu is a fundamental philosophical and cosmological foundation deriving from the continent. By rejecting the notion of “otherness,” uBuntu presents a “non-hierarchical and non-discriminatory understanding of human[s],” that can contribute to more equitable partnerships (Cossa et al. 2020; Waghid 2020). Values such as cooperation, interdependence, and interconnectedness that capture the essence of humanness can help partners overcome the undue emphasis given to competition, individualism, and economic gains in the modern world (Chitumba 2013; Waghid 2020). This grounding on uBuntu will help African institutions to no longer embrace the modernistic perception of humanity that leads us to create institutions and programs that make us feel good because we help others; we educate our children to be social entrepreneurs, corporate executives, and employees carrying a pseudo social responsibility shield with the goal of developing pseudo social equity framed in terms of helping others; and we can continue to claim a commitment to transformational education notwithstanding our commitment to counter-intuitive philosophical foundations and perceptions of the other based on neo-colonial assumptions (Cossa 2018b:197).

Multiple factors have created the opportunity for African universities to (re-) think their intellectual and moral positions and obligations: the advent of online education in Africa, how Covid 19 engendered different educational models, the mitigation of connectivity challenges through partnerships, social movements in education such as *Rhodes Must Fall* and *Fees Must Fall*, and the overall decolonising education efforts on the continent. As such, the universities must engage in critical decision-making regarding when and how to partner with communities and educational institutions on the continent and beyond, the extent to which universities ought to learn from foreign systems, and how to foster equitable partnerships. Perhaps the current cross-roads is a unique opportunity for Africa to foster equitable university-society partnerships informed by the Pan-African vision, the idea of an African renaissance, and the wisdom of Global Africa (Hodgson and Byfield 2017).

### **Authors’ Contribution**

All the authors significantly contributed to all parts of this study, and hence the order of their names is not a reflection of hierarchy.

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