Volume 2, Issue 2 (2026), Article e.v2i2.1489
Journal of Global Higher Education
https://journal.libraries.wm.edu/global_higher_education/index

CRITICAL REFLECTION

Ghosts in Global Higher Education Partnerships: Uncovering North-South Hidden Dynamics

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Abstract

Global partnerships in higher education are frequently celebrated as vehicles for global progress and mutual benefit. However, this celebratory discourse often masks 'ghosts', that is, persistent, systemic dynamics that reproduce colonial hierarchies and entrench power imbalances. This article critically examines five such ghosts: the assumption of universal scalability in the 'What-Went-Right' approach, the performative politics of representation, the restrictive economics of eligibility, the donor-receiver projection template, and the intellectual gatekeeping of the 'usual suspects'. By moving beyond descriptive reflection toward a position of ethics, inclusivity, and accountability, this article argues that to move beyond these ghosts, academics, practitioners, and funders must actively confront the structural and financial architectures that sustain them.

Keywords: Global higher education partnerships, North-South partnerships, power asymmetries, researcher–practitioner reflections, reflective inquiry

Introduction

This article contributes to ongoing debates on the challenges of global partnerships, particularly in North–South higher education (HE) and HE-industry collaborations. It moves beyond commonly discussed challenges to conceptualise partnership dynamics through the lens of my professional experiences as both a HE researcher (including research on HE and HE-industry partnerships) and a HE partnership practitioner (involving coordination, research, capacity building projects, and academic mobility). Drawing on insights from comparative and international education and education policy studies, the article develops a conceptual framework grounded in both research and practice. The article builds on a keynote address I delivered at the Global Education Partnership Forum in October 2025, organised by Education Finland and the Finnish Centre for Expertise in Education and Development, on what makes partnerships work beyond memoranda of understanding across borders and sectors (Eta, 2025).

Existing literature highlights power asymmetries as a persistent challenge in North–South partnerships (de Groot et al., 2025; Eta et al., 2024; Kassie & Angervall, 2022; Mitchell et al., 2020). These asymmetries, rooted in funding structures, governance arrangements, and perceptions of expertise, shape agenda-setting, knowledge production, and whose voices are prioritised. Scholarship on decolonising partnerships seeks to counter these inequalities by creating 'a new terrain of reason' (Maringe, 2022, p. 254), strengthening local knowledge and fostering more equitable engagement (Chasi, 2019; Haapakoski, 2020; Maringe, 2022). This aspiration speaks to what Woldegiorgis (2025) calls a third space, where partners engage as equals and knowledge, power, and meaning are continually negotiated. Similarly, Eta et al. (2025) explore this third space through dialogue between Global North and Global South actors themselves, arguing that sustainable partnerships depend on both relational and organisational dimensions, although short funding cycles often privilege procedures over relationships.

Building on this literature, this reflective paper examines the unspoken and often normalised forces that shape collaboration. I call these forces 'ghosts'—dynamics that influence how partnerships emerge, evolve, are sustained, or dissolve. These ghosts help explain why some collaborations become extractive rather than reciprocal, why others remain symbolic rather than substantive, and why some formal agreements do not always translate into meaningful action.

Researcher–practitioner reflections on North–South partnerships

The reflections presented in this article are grounded in both my scholarly work and professional practice. My research focuses on HE, comparative and international education, global education governance, and North–South HE partnerships, including HE-industry partnerships, while my professional experience spans partnership development in HE and the educational technology sector. Originally from the Global South, I have studied, lived, and worked in the Global North for nearly two decades while collaborating across both contexts. This trajectory has positioned me at the intersection of multiple academic, cultural, and institutional settings, shaping how I understand and navigate global collaboration.

Drawing on this dual positionality as researcher and practitioner, I adopt a retrospective reflective approach to examine my professional experiences of partnership development. I have contributed to partnership coordination between universities in Finland and across Africa, facilitated dialogue among HE partners, co-developed funding proposals, contributed to HE needs analyses, and served as an expert in HE development initiatives. I have also participated in North–South academic writing and co-publication. These experiences provide the basis for examining the negotiations, tensions, opportunities, and aspirations that underpin partnership practice.

While grounded in personal professional experience, these reflections are situated within broader scholarship on global partnerships, global education governance, and comparative and international education. As Raelin (2002, p. 66) notes, reflection involves "periodically stepping back to ponder the meaning of what has recently transpired." In this paper, I step back from the immediacy of project implementation to examine the assumptions, norms, and power relations that shape partnerships and their sustainability. Many of these challenges remain normalised and unspoken because they are perceived as inevitable, because individuals fear jeopardising relationships or funding opportunities, or

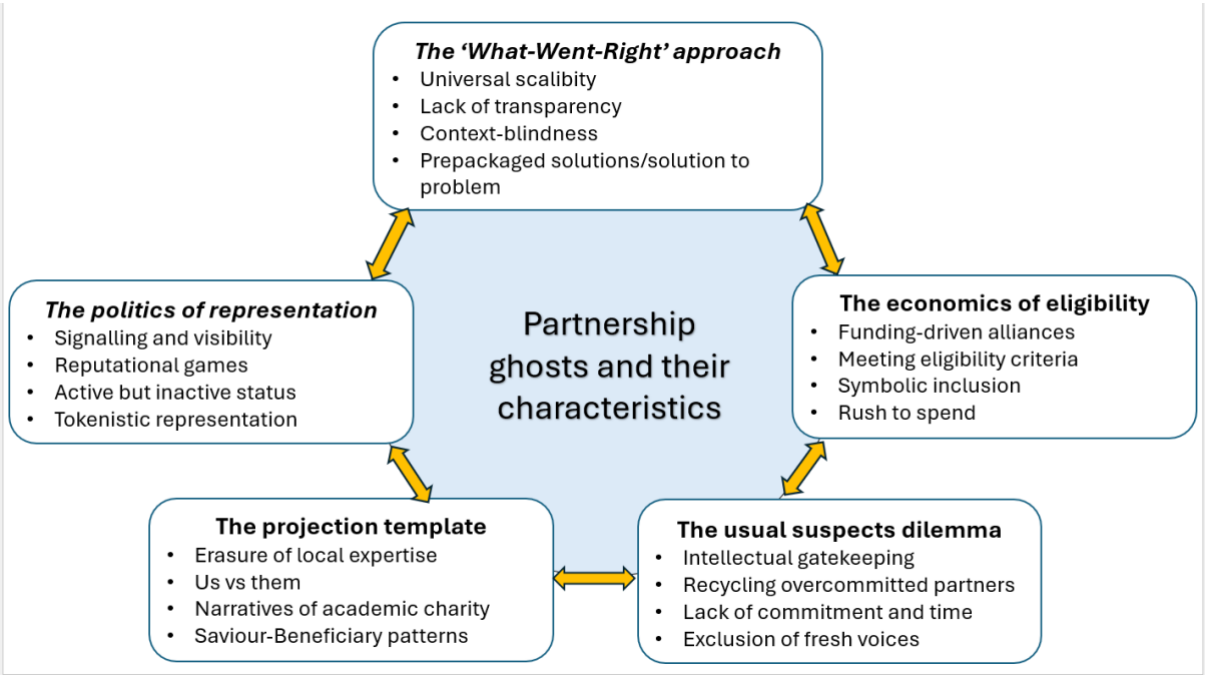
because there are few spaces where such concerns can be discussed openly and honestly. By naming and analysing these dynamics, I seek to contribute to a more honest, grounded, and equitable conversation about sustainable partnerships.

I interpret my professional experiences through scholarship on policy borrowing, academic dependency, and equitable partnerships, examining whose priorities count, how funding shapes participation, and the implications for reciprocity and ownership. The five 'ghosts' are interpretive categories, not formally coded findings. Informed by my North–South positionality, these reflections illustrate possible dynamics without establishing their prevalence, verifying others' motivations, or representing all partners' perspectives.

Beyond collaboration rhetoric: Unmasking the ghost in North–South partnerships

In this article, I discuss five 'ghosts' in global partnership development: the 'What Went Right' approach, politics of representation, economics of eligibility, persistence of donor–receiver templates, and the 'usual suspects' dilemma. These distinct yet interconnected challenges form a hidden architecture influencing global partnership practices from formation to dissemination. Figure 1 summarises these ghosts.

Figure 1: Partnership ghosts and their characteristics



The 'What-Went-Right' approach

Global partnerships are often initiated through narratives of failure and crisis. Often, they focus on what went wrong in one system, seeking solutions from 'successful' systems for those perceived as struggling—a phenomenon termed education borrowing (Author 2018; Steiner-Khamsi, 2013). An equally problematic starting point in policy borrowing, observed in partnership development practices is what Steiner-Khamsi (2013) calls the 'What-Went-Right' approach in educational development. This is the 'erroneous assumption that what went right in one educational system will inevitably work well in another', thus justifying the transfer of 'reform packages' or 'best practices' (Steiner-Khamsi, 2012, p. 20). Although Steiner-Khamsi focuses on cross-national policy borrowing, I apply her critique to inter-

institutional partnerships, where educational success can legitimise the transfer of particular solutions without sufficient attention to local needs and contexts. The theoretical bridge is the assumption of transferability, with partnerships serving as vehicles for circulating models rather than as forms of national policy adoption.

Many partnerships I have been involved in or observed begin with approaches and solutions designed in the Global North in search of local problems in the Global South, particularly during the COVID-19 lockdown when I worked in the Finnish EdTech sector. COVID-19 opened the global education sphere to corporate actors at unprecedented speed, presenting digitalisation and EdTech as a panacea for the learning crisis (Williamson & Hogan, 2020). Invitations to meetings on partnering to sell Finnish solutions to the Global South intensified, often justified by the perceived success of the Finnish education system and the urgent need for local partnerships to address the learning crisis. Rather than starting with locally defined needs and a thorough understanding of context, EdTech companies and solution providers often promote pre-packaged solutions developed in their own sociopolitical settings. In this sense, the Global South became a "testing ground" for policies and solutions (Salimi, 2025, p. 2). A similar pattern exists in HE capacity-building and research partnerships, where research problems are often predetermined and proposals largely completed before partners from Global South institutions are invited to join, sometimes only weeks or days before the submission deadline.

Even well-intentioned initiatives risk failure when detached from original enabling conditions. Contextual relevance, rooted in local realities and defined with local partners, is paramount, as political histories, institutional cultures, regulatory environments, and social norms fundamentally shape practices. To mitigate this 'ghost,' partnerships must prioritize locally grounded problem co-creation through needs assessment (Eta et al., 2025). When drawing on models from other systems, transparency is crucial; partners must openly articulate the political, economic, and cultural conditions that facilitated success, critically assessing their presence or desirability in the new context. Inspiration without direct solution importation can still offer valuable starting points for locally relevant solutions.

The politics of representation

Comparative and international education research shows policy borrowing is often driven by political motives rather than inherent quality (Steiner-Khamsi, 2012), legitimizing contested national reforms or controversial domestic agendas (Eta, 2018; Ochs, 2006; Steiner-Khamsi, 2002). Pressure from global organisations to meet international standards also compels governments to adopt external models to avoid being ‘left behind’ (Steiner-Khamsi, 2014; Steiner-Khamsi & Stolpe, 2006).

In global partnerships, this ‘politics’ manifests as reputational games, where international engagement signals enhance institutional rankings or visibility. This performative environment often results in signed memoranda and updated website but little substantive collaboration. It is common for partners to disengage after a meeting or two, even as the partnership remains listed as active on CVs and institutional and professional platforms. Global North academics often receive co-authorship invitations for finalised papers from Global South counterparts, rarely vice-versa. When showcasing international engagement becomes the primary goal, representation is instrumentalised; a partner’s value is then determined by symbolic capital (perceived difference, affiliation, location) rather than expertise.

As someone originally from the Global South, working in HE in the Global North and collaborating across both, I have repeatedly witnessed this instrumentalisation. I have had to cancel meetings with Global South partners because my 'white' colleagues could not attend, or invite them to meetings where they had no meaningful role because their presence enhanced the optics of international expertise. I recall visiting a school in the Global South with my colleague's fifteen-year-old 'white' daughter; despite her age, staff immediately assumed she was the expected guest while I stood unnoticed. At a HE conference in the Global South, I watched my 'white' colleagues invited to chair sessions while I was 'informally interviewed' to verify my expertise. In the Global North, an African-led organisation told me they were not seeking another African when I was asked to represent my team as a speaker at their event; they specifically wanted my 'white' colleagues to help validate their project.

These experiences highlight how partnership politics shape legitimacy and authority. When expertise is filtered through race, skin colour, and geography, trust erodes and collaboration becomes performative. To counter tokenism, institutions must ensure that every partner has a clearly defined and meaningful role, supported by periodic reviews that distinguish genuine engagement from symbolic association. Yet these entrenched dynamics, reinforced by global rankings and the commercialisation of internationalisation, cannot be addressed through procedural fixes alone. They require sustained critical reflection and a challenge to the structures that privilege appearance over substance.

The economics of eligibility

Funding structures profoundly influence global HE partnerships, dictating collaboration dynamics. Funder-set eligibility requirements shape both initiation and long-term development, determining who is considered a suitable partner. In comparative education, the "economics of policy borrowing" (Steiner-Khamsi, 2006, p. 665) reveals how aid conditionality often compels global South governments to adopt global North or donor policies (Chisholm & Leyendecker, 2008; Dorombaeva et al., 2025; Steiner-Khamsi, 2006). This occurs even when policies misalign with local priorities. As conditional reform packages are often a primary way to secure funding, governments usually adopt them despite a lack of local ownership. Consequently, implementation frequently stalls post-funding (Steiner-Khamsi, 2006).

A similar dynamic pervades global HE partnerships. Alliances are sometimes form not from shared vision, but to meet specific criteria, like multi-institutional or multi-country compositions. Partners may be sought via cold emails or referrals, primarily for funding, not genuine inclusion. It is no secret that many North–South HE partnership initiatives are driven less by locally identified needs than by the priorities of partners in the Global North. When funding opportunities arise, Northern partners often approach Southern institutions with pre-designed project proposals. Motivated by the pursuit of funding and international visibility, partners in the Global South frequently accept these initiatives despite having limited influence over their design. This often results in weak local ownership, undermines long-term sustainability, and means that many initiatives end when the funding ceases.

Another insidious dimension of the economics of eligibility is the 'rush to spend'. Project leaders often feel immense pressure to exhaust all secured funding before a cycle runs out to avoid returning the balance to the funder and the paperwork that comes with it. This artificial urgency leads to situations where sometimes, activities, workshops, and international travels are organised not because they advance the project's substantive goals,

but simply to deplete the budget. When spending becomes a significant metric of success, the partnership's intellectual and social mission may be sacrificed for the sake of bureaucratic compliance.

On a related personal note, I experienced the economics of partnership firsthand when I was invited to join a HE capacity-development proposal for the Global South by a Global North partner institution in an area outside my primary expertise. After discussing how my background in partnership coordination could support ethical and mutually beneficial collaboration in an advisory role, I accepted and helped shape my contribution to the proposal. Months later, I discovered by coincidence that the project had been funded and that an initial meeting had already been scheduled. I had not been informed of the decision or invited to participate until I followed up myself. It became clear that my inclusion had been largely symbolic; my name had been required to meet an institutional criterion rather than to enable genuine collaboration. This experience is common in discussions of 'name-dropping' or partners walking away once funding is secured due to a lack of voice or mutual interest. While I ultimately withdrew from that project, the situation raises broader ethical questions: How can funding bodies ensure that listed partners are substantive contributors rather than strategic additions? How can eligibility frameworks avoid incentivising symbolic inclusion?

To address these challenges, partnerships should be built on a shared mission before funding is sought, with all partners co-defining their roles during proposal development. Funding agencies must also introduce accountability mechanisms to ensure active and equitable participation beyond proposal submission. Yet the "economics of eligibility" is rooted in global financial inequalities. As long as funding flows primarily from the global North under rigid funding conditions, pressure for symbolic inclusion will persist. Overcoming this ghost requires a shift towards trust-based funding models that prioritise long-term impact over eligibility metrics.

The projection template

A central challenge in global partnership literature is the persistent asymmetrical power relation between Global North and South partners. This imbalance is primarily driven by resource inequalities, where the Global North typically provides the funding and, consequently, sets the agenda, assumes the role of expert and project leader, and maintains epistemic dominance (Mitchell et al., 2020). Scholars and practitioners advocate co-creation—a collaborative development of shared objects and practices to foster mutually beneficial, inclusive partnerships integrating diverse epistemologies (Eta et al., 2025; Linnér & Wibeck, 2019; Paavola et al., 2004; Redman & Wiek, 2021). Emphasising participatory, bottom-up, and transparent practices, co-creation facilitates co-learning and helps diminish the hierarchical structures that often separate partners (Bell & Pahl, 2018; Eta et al., 2025). Since scientific knowledge in collaborative settings relies on collective trust and interaction (Rolin, 2015), co-creation ensures that outcomes reflect a shared perspective rather than a singular, dominant viewpoint.

Despite co-creation rhetoric, HE partnerships frequently revert to the 'projection template', a pattern of donor–receiver or saviour–beneficiary narratives. Success is still too often measured by how much 'they' have learned from 'us'. Communication is a critical tool in this dynamic, either reinforcing or disrupting these hierarchies (Eta & Georges, 2024). Because the majority of funding originates in the Global North, Northern partners are often positioned at the center of knowledge production and dissemination. This perpetuates a

narrative of academic charity, where the North is the 'helper' and the South is the 'recipient' in need of assistance. This dependency language is not only imposed from the outside; global South partners often feel compelled to adopt it to secure funding, reinforcing colonial structures.

Evaluation metrics often focus on what Global South partners have gained, rather than the mutual contributions of both sides. This one-sided reporting erases the expertise and agency of Southern participants. I recently reviewed an article where Northern and Southern students co-developed a teaching module from inception. Yet, when featured in a Northern publication, the story became about Northern students going to teach their Southern peers. Such narrative slippages are common in reports and social media that emphasize how many of 'them benefited' from 'our funding', obscuring the reciprocity that co-creation is meant to foster.

To tackle the projection template, institutions must adopt reciprocal success metrics that ask: What are we learning? How are all partners being transformed? Evaluation and communication should recognise the expertise of all partners and reflect co-creation, equity, and mutual respect. Yet these narratives remain rooted in colonial logic and unequal funding structures. As long as funding is concentrated in the global North, discourses of "help" and "assistance" will persist. Exorcising this ghost therefore requires not only changing language but also reconfiguring funding relationships through greater investment by global South governments and institutions, while critically examining the power structures that determine whose knowledge is valued.

The 'usual suspects' dilemma

The 'usual suspects' ghost signifies reliance on a small, visible, and often overcommitted partner group, linked to intellectual gatekeeping where few individuals or institutions control international HE collaboration (Alatas, 2003). These 'usual suspects' are sometimes chosen not for project capacity or expertise but as safe, pre-validated choices within existing academic legitimacy and dependency structures (Alatas, 2003). This dependency reinforces a hierarchy where the already visible individuals and institutions gain even more visibility, while emerging scholars, practitioners and institutions remain marginalised. This is why we often read on websites and on HE institutional marketing materials that we collaborate with 'prestigious universities', or 'internationally acclaimed scholars', reinforcing dependency.

Reliance on overcommitted partners often leads to a lack of genuine commitment, straining partnerships and slowing progress, especially given the tight timelines of international projects. When these individuals keep saying yes to new invitations, they often lack the time to contribute substantively, leaving the actual work to be done in a vacuum or by less-recognised staff. This not only undermines the quality of the collaboration but also prevents the creation of space for new, fresh energy and diverse voices that could bring different epistemological perspectives to the table.

To move beyond the usual suspects, practitioners must critically assess partnership relevance and create space for new voices by prioritising capacity, shared vision, and fresh perspectives over institutional prestige. Breaking this cycle requires overcoming institutional risk aversion, internationalisation metrics, and global knowledge inequalities that position established actors as gateways to funding and legitimacy. Confronting this ghost demands

both individual and structural commitment to valuing diverse expertise and building the capacity of new actors for meaningful participation.

Conclusion

Naming the ghosts of partnerships is an act of resistance against the inertia of business as usual in global HE. These dynamics cut across North–South, North–North, and South–South collaborations, making them a global partnership phenomenon. Exposing the hidden influences of context, politics, economics, representation, and commitment shifts us from a model of academic charity to one of reciprocity. Confronting these ghosts requires more than individual awareness; it demands dismantling the colonial logics that privilege Northern expertise and institutional optics over authentic collaboration. Ethical global partnerships require us to stop treating partners as symbols, beneficiaries, or strategic additions, and instead commit to a shared intellectual journey grounded in humility, honesty, equity, and mutual respect.

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Acknowledgements

I would like to thank Education Finland and the Finnish Centre for Expertise in Education and Development (FinCEED) for the opportunity to deliver the keynote address at the Global Education Partnership Forum in October 2025, which inspired this article. I am also grateful to the anonymous reviewers for their insightful comments and constructive suggestions, which helped strengthen the manuscript.

AI Statement

ChatGPT was used to identify grammatical errors, and the author made final revisions based on his own judgment. The author accepts full responsibility for all editorial decisions in the final manuscript.

Conflict of Interest

The authors have no conflict of interest regarding this publication.

Article History

Submitted: 22 June 2026

Accepted: 12 October 2026
Published: 4 November 2026