

Navigating Cross-border Academic Mobility: Towards a “Third Space?”

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[Abstract] Within a qualitative research methodology, this study investigated cross-border academic mobility partnership between two higher education institutions. The objective of the partnership was to share strategies and build capacity among future teachers and teacher educators to increase the quality of rural education. The study explored two objectives: 1) to examine the key features that constitute cross-border academic mobility; and 2) to draw implications from the key features in terms of the underpinning mobility model. The findings revealed key features that constituted mobility: a co-created mobility agenda; an inclusive, participatory and responsive curriculum; and sharing common challenges and solutions among others. The study concluded that the key features positioned the mobility partnership outside of the traditional Global North-South cross-border academic mobility model which is based on hierarchical power relations in the global geopolitics of knowledge creation and distribution. The features suggested the “third space” model, in cross-border academic mobility.

[Keywords] cross-border academic mobility, Global North, Global South, border-crossing, third space.

Introduction

Worldwide, higher education has witnessed an unprecedented intensification in cross-border academic mobility. This has included mobility of students, staff, programmes, research and curriculum, and projects between countries and cultures as part of the internationalisation drive and the globalised knowledge economy. Applied interchangeably with *transnational*, *international*, or *international academic mobility* (Shen, et al., 2022, p. 1319), cross-border academic mobility often involves physical or geographical movement between national borders, as well as virtually, as seen during the post COVID-19 pandemic era. Thus, cross-border academic mobility entails:

... movements of people and organisms (including students, especially postgraduate students, researchers, and academics, resources, equipment) coupled with materials (such as infrastructure, resources, equipment) and immaterialises (such as ideas, information, knowledge, skills, emotions, imaginations) in higher education contexts (Shen et al., 2022, p. 1321).

Depending on temporal dimensions, cross-border academic mobility can be classified either as short-term mobility (e.g., research or study visit to a foreign country, student or staff exchange, semester attendance in a foreign country), or medium-term mobility (e.g., where a student moves to a foreign country to pursue a full-degree in the host institution), or long-term mobility (e.g., where the stay in a foreign country is over an extended period of time) (Aggelos & Theodora, 2022; Wan & Geo-JaJa, 2013; Knight, 2012). In addition to temporal dimensions, cross-border academic mobility can also be categorised in spatial terms such as physical (implying geographical physical movements) or virtually, or online, using online platforms. Virtual cross-border academic mobility in the form of joint Webinar, virtual conferences, guest lecturers via platforms such as Zoom, or Teams became more popular post the COVID-19 pandemic.

Despite its popularity in higher education, cross-border academic mobility has been a space riddled with tension, contestation and critique. Thus, adopting a decolonial perspective, scholars from the Global South (e.g., Unkule, 2021; Fernanda, 2021; Chasi, 2020) have criticised the concept as a Western-centric colonial concept that has served to reproduce and perpetuate the hierarchical, unequal, and uneven power relations in the global geopolitics of knowledge creation and reproduction. This has been echoed by Global North scholars such as de Wit (2024) who argues that, in its current form, cross-border academic mobility is a “Westernised concept, largely Anglo-Saxon, and predominantly an English-speaking paradigm imbued with the hegemony of the Western world” (p. 9). Shahjahan et al. (2021) describe the global epistemic system:

[...] the existing hierarchical global higher education system privileges certain world regions (e.g. Anglo-Euro American contexts) as metropolitan centres of knowledge and learning, while allocating others to the periphery. Those working in metropolitan world regions have the epistemic privilege to articulate and shape global discourses (p. 76).

Thus, the dynamic of the global knowledge power structure is such that those who reside in metropolitan centres of knowledge and learning have the epistemic privilege to articulate and shape the cross-border academic mobility discourse. This relationship is legitimised by the traditional linear evolution of societies where the Global North is viewed as the most advanced position for all, and for the Global South to emulate it. The basic argument by traditional modernisation advocates has been that not only is the Global North a manifestation of the universal road to development but that it only shows the Global South the image of its own future. As a result of this hegemonic worldview, cross-border academic mobility has been dominated by Northern perspectives in its definitions, concepts, and practices. Chasi (2020) highlights the impact of this Euro-American centric modernisation view on higher education institutions in the Global South:

...Southern universities tend to look towards the North in their internationalisation endeavours, which are aimed at making the university compatible with norms and standards set elsewhere (p. 2).

Evident from the foregoing discussion is that, in its current form, the relationship in the traditional North-South partnerships has laid bare the imbalances in power, resources, and knowledge.

Adding to this is the fact that cross-border academic mobility has been restricted to a global elite at the expense of marginalised communities, particularly those with migrant status (Jones, 2022). Issues of equity and social justice are further worsened by the post COVID-19 introduction of virtual cross-border academic mobility where only a small global elite is likely to benefit given the lack of equity in technological access at the global level. Further compounding issues of cross-border academic mobility is the dependency on the Global North funding, which at times has come with conditions attached, raising questions of whose needs and whose interests such partnerships serve.

Given these challenges cited, calls have been made for the transformation of cross-border academic mobility. Such calls have included the move towards decolonisation and centering of Africa as a starting point in an *inward-out approach* to partnerships (Chasi, 2020) as well as an inclusive, accessible, equity oriented, or rebalanced (with dismantled unequal power relations) cross-border academic mobility as opposed to an elitist approach (Jones, 2022; Fernanda, 2021). A transformed and re-imagined or futuristic conceptualisation and implementation of cross-border academic mobility is summed up by de Wit (2024):

[...] internationalisation is a process of integrating an international, intercultural or global dimension into the purpose, functions and delivery of post-secondary education in order to enhance the quality of education and research for all students and staff, and to make a meaningful contribution to society (p. 8).

Debates have also centred around the underpinning rationale propelling higher education institutions to engage in cross-border academic mobility. In most cases, prestige and reputation that institutions seek to gain through the global higher education ranking systems have constituted the major rationale for engaging in cross-border academic mobility. Consequently, there has been a paradigm shift from cooperation to competition as institutions vie for top positions on the ranking system. The competition for top ranking has overshadowed the objective of cross-border academic mobility as a space for learning. Succinctly describing this situation, Aggelos and Theodora (2022) state:

[...] many universities seek partnerships to promote themselves and increase their prestige. In fact, many times, too much emphasis is placed on the internationalisation of the university and other priorities concerning students and academic staff are ignored (p. 62).

The ranking and reputational race is framed within a quantitative model where the number of international students received, the number of international staff, and the number of high impact co-authored publications, among others, are computed to determine an institution's position on the ranking system (de Wit, 2019). Thus, with the new drivers, cross-border academic mobility in higher education is increasingly becoming reputation and ranking focused, thus less enhancing the quality of education, research, and meaningful contribution to society.

Against the backdrop of the foregoing discussion, this study investigated a short-term, cross-border academic mobility partnership between two institutions, one located in the Global

North and the other, in the Global South. Stretching over the three-year period from 2022 to 2024, the objective of the cross-border academic mobility between the two institutions is to *share strategies and build capacity among future teachers and teacher educators to increase the quality of rural education*. The study examined the key features that constituted cross-border academic mobility and to draw implications for the model underpinning the mobility. The following questions guided the study:

- i) What are the key features of the cross-border academic mobility between the two partner institutions?
- ii) What implications do the key features hold for the model underpinning the mobility?

Context of the Study

The study was carried out in the context of two higher education institutions, which are anonymised throughout the study as *Institution A* and *Institution B*. Located in the Global North, Institution A is a fairly old institution, established in 1858, while Institution B located in the Global South is a fairly young institution, established in 1992. Institution A is located in the north-central or mid-western region of the United States. Institution B is located in Windhoek, the capital city of Namibia. Namibia is a developing country located in the south-western corner of the African continent.

At the time of the study, the two institutions were involved in a two-year cross-border academic mobility partnership focusing on improving the quality of rural education. Specifically, the objective of the mobility partnership was to share strategies and build capacity among future teachers and teacher educators to increase the quality of rural education in the two countries. The mobility curriculum included a series of 2-4 virtual workshops each year, followed by in-person exchange visits. The study was conducted in the second year of implementing the mobility partnership.

Despite a difference of more than a hundred years in age, the two institutions shared a commonality in that they all counted a student population close to thirty thousand at the time of the study. At the time of the study, Institution A was structured into six colleges, namely, College of Agriculture and Life Sciences; College of Business; College of Design; College of Engineering; College of Human Sciences; and College of Liberal Arts and Sciences. Institution B, on the other hand, was structured into four faculties, namely, Faculty of Agriculture, Engineering and Natural Sciences; Faculty of Commerce, Management and Law; Faculty of Education and Human Sciences; and the Faculty of Health and Veterinary Medicine.

At Institution A, the School of Education was housed in the College of Human Sciences while at Institution B, the School of Education was housed in the Faculty of Education and Human Sciences. Both institutions lay a claim to excellence in teaching, research and community service. Further to this, the two institutions position internationalisation or cross-border academic mobility as a key strategic objective.

Suffice it to note is that while training teachers for a variety of contexts, both institutions claim to supply teachers to rural contexts. As will be elaborated in the subsequent discussion, it was therefore deemed important by both institutions to train teachers who are innovative and creative enough to cope with the demands of teaching in rural contexts.

Conceptual Framework

The study used Giroux's concept of *border-crossing* (Giroux, 1994, p. 143) to generate the deeper insights needed to understand the nature of the cross-border academic mobility between the two partner institutions. While cross-border academic mobility, or border crossing, conjures images of in-person, physically crossing at a geographical border, the study drew upon insights provided by Giroux's (1994) conceptualisation of border crossing to refer to an ideational activity that involves ideological, epistemological, and cultural border crossing. In the present study, the concept border crossing or cross-border extends to mean a stance in which the dominant relationships of cross-border academic mobility, ideologies, and practices are challenged, questioned, and transformed. Border crossing is used to mean a counter-hegemonic space in which one critically engages in an exercise of dislocation and relocation into a new and transformed space based on new epistemological and cultural relationships.

Border crossing first suggests that one inhabits a particular new home or space, different from one's initial space. Border crossing then becomes a process of departing or making a shift from one's current *home* to a new home. It extends beyond the process of mere border crossing in a touristic sense (Zeichner et al., 2015) to border crossing characterised by tension and disruption of the comfort of one's own home. Giroux describes the concept of home as:

Home refers to the cultural, social, and political boundaries that demarcate varying spaces of comfort, suffering, abuse, and security that define an individual's or group's location and personality (Giroux, 1994, p. 143).

Border crossing therefore entails the process of making problematic one's own location of privilege, power and domination and engaging into a radical shift to inhabit a new space, which is characterised by a new set of relationships and powers. Conversely, it entails making problematic one's own space of subordination and oppression through a process of resistance, and radically relocating into a new space, characterised by a new set of relationships and powers. Giroux (1994) proceeds to describe border crossing as follows:

Border crossing suggests that teachers and other intellectuals both problematise and take leave of the cultural, theoretical and ideological borders that enclose them within the safety of those places we inherit and occupy which frame our lives in very specific and concrete ways (p. 142).

With that, border crossing entails de-constructing the borders that define one's politics of location, moving into a new positionality in which one can unsettle and disrupt one's spaces of domination. It entails crossing abstract, theoretical, epistemic, ideological, and cultural borders as new subjects. Border crossing means adopting new identities that can produce resistance to structures of domination and oppression. This will entail moving towards a more diverse and inclusive cross-border academic mobility paradigm replacing the western paradigm (de Wit, 2019).

Border-crossing therefore entails interrogating, questioning, and making problematic one's location in the Global North or Global South of the global geopolitical knowledge system. Giroux's concept of border crossing outlined in the foregoing discussion was thus used as a

conceptual lens through which the cross-border academic mobility partnership between the two institutions was viewed.

Methodology

The study adopted a qualitative research methodology, with a phenomenological research design as a vehicle for understanding the everyday experiences and views of the participants pertaining to rural education (Johnson & Christensen, 2014; Greef, 2011; Patton, 2002). Focus group interviews, document analysis, and observation served as the key sources of data. Data was aided by the experiences and positionality of the researchers who served in various roles ranging from designing the mobility partnership, participating in the mobility, as well as its implementation.

Purposive sampling was followed, with participants selected to the focus groups on the basis of their knowledge and experiences of rural education in general, and teacher education in particular. Blended focus group meetings were adopted with some happening face-to-face while others virtually via Zoom. A total of eight focus group discussions were held. Each focus group session had a moderator who moderated the discussion. Across the different focus groups, 70 individuals participated in the focus group discussion (Table 1). These profiles show that focus group members presented a wealth of experiences in rural education given the diverse profiles they represented.

Table 1

Profiles of Focus Group Participants

Institution/course	Male	Female	Position/background	Total
Session with college director and deans of schools	5	4	College director, deans, and senior academics	9
School District 1	3	3	Superintendent; principal, professional development director, professional development coach	6
School District 2	3	1	School principal, associate school principal, deputy superintendent	4
Lunch hour seminar on rural education	7	8	Education graduate students	15
School District 3	9	4	Superintendent, school principal, agriculture teacher, learners in senior agriculture class	13

College teaching class	4	8	Graduate students	12
Virtual discussion- Graduate leadership group	1	6	School principal and superintendents	7
Virtual focus group discussion with education administrators	3	1	School principal and superintendents	4
Total				70

Data sourced through focus group discussions were augmented through observation and document studies. In particular, document studies entailed an analysis of the primary documents related to the cross-border academic mobility partnership between the two institutions while observation data entailed observation of processes of curriculum development and implementation.

Data were analyzed through a process of identification of emerging patterns, coding and subjecting the patterns to an analysis process. The data collection process included researchers meeting for a debriefing session each day where they jointly reflected on the day's discussions in the focus groups. Not only did the joint reflections generate insights and deeper understanding of the data but they also served as initial analysis of the data.

Presentation of Findings

One of the objectives of the study was to investigate the key features that constituted the cross-border academic mobility between the partner institutions. The findings in this regard are presented below.

A Co-created Mobility Agenda

One of the features that emerged from the data pertained to the manner in which the mobility agenda was created, which was described by participants as a *co-created mobility agenda*. This was evident in the observation data as well as in the data gleaned through discussions with participants in the partnership. Participants shared the process of crafting the mobility agenda as one that started as a response to a call for applications for short-term mobility funding that was placed by a Windhoek based agency of the home country of Institution A. The process proceeded by the leadership of the School of Education at Institution B working on an application in collaboration with a Fulbright scholar from Institution A who at the time was based at Institution B for a yearlong period. One of the conditions attached to the funding was a joint application between a United States based institution and an institution from another country.

Participants further indicated that while general guidelines were provided in the call for applications, the focus of the mobility was not prescribed. The team considered several options as focus areas for the application. Finally, the team agreed to settle on improving the quality of rural

education as the focus area for the funding. Several meetings took place between the two institutions to finalise the application. The meetings included both face-to-face and virtual to enable broader participation in the crafting of the agenda. A memorandum of understanding (MOU) was subsequently signed by the two institutions following the granting of the funding.

An Inclusive, Participatory, and Responsive Mobility Curriculum

In addition to the co-creation of the mobility agenda, data revealed a mobility curriculum that was described as inclusive, participatory and responsive. The curriculum was described as follows: The curriculum is tentative in that it needs to be responsive and participatory, including the ideas and needs of partners as they emerge. This responsiveness and participation are vital if we want the knowledge generated in the partnership to be utilised, created collaboratively in democratic community with one another, unlike colonizing practices of the past, and sustainable (Workshop Notes, 2022, p.1).

As seen in the excerpt from the project documents, descriptors such as inclusive, participatory, responsive, flexible and tentative were used to describe the mobility curriculum. The curriculum was described as being *inclusive* to highlight the fact that it covered the needs of all parties. Similarly, the descriptor *participatory* meant that the design and crafting of the curriculum was a result of a participatory process involving the partners in a democratic manner. A *responsive* curriculum meant that the curriculum was aligned to the needs and interests of the partner institutions.

Responsiveness to local needs was also evident in the choice of focus of the mobility, namely, *to share strategies and build capacity among future teachers and teacher educators to increase the quality of rural education*. The focus of the mobility demonstrated responsiveness to the needs and contexts of both parties. While Institution B from the Global South is largely a rural institution, serving rural communities, Institution A also saw its clientèle as being largely rural, despite its urban location.

Lastly, the descriptors *flexible* and *tentative* highlighted the nature of a curriculum that is able to adapt to emerging needs on the ground as opposed to a curriculum that is fixed and cannot change despite the circumstances.

Sharing Common Challenges, Learning From One Another

The focus group discussions were based on the principle of *sharing common challenges, learning from one another*, which was articulated at the beginning of the discussions by the College Director at Institution A. Against the backdrop of this principle, focus group discussions proceeded by sharing understanding of the concept of rural education, exploring challenges and opportunities for working in a rural context; sharing strategies on how to support teachers (both pre-service and in-service teachers) to cope with teaching in a rural context; and lastly, to learn from one another how the challenges are being addressed in the different contexts. Participants shared the understanding of rural education from different contexts (Table 2).

Table 2*Sharing of Understanding of Rural Education*

Institution A	Institution B
Participants from Institution A defined rural education as follows:	Participants from Institution B defined rural education as follows:
● Farming environment ● Miles covered – on the bus, an hour ● Small towns (some with <400 inhabitants) ● Learners on farms ● Learners coming from outside town ● Not more than one building ● Knowing students and knowing each other ● Transportation costs ● Lack of diversity ● School is the biggest employer in town ● Difficult attracting and retaining young teachers	● Remoteness ● Isolation ● Inadequate resources and facilities ● Minimal parental involvement in school activities ● Persistent poverty ● Poor access to schools ● Poor working conditions ● Difficult attracting and retaining young teachers ● Learners are generally disciplined, cultured and hard-working ● Subsistence farming communities

While there were divergences in the understanding of rural education among the groups in how the concept was understood, there were equally some convergences. For instance, rural education was commonly associated with agricultural/farming communities, remoteness in terms

of distance, and challenges in terms of attracting and retaining young teachers. Although challenges differed according to context, two challenges seemed common among the groups, namely, that of attracting and retaining young teachers in rural schools as well as resource shortage in rural schools. While young teachers in the Global South may have limited choices in terms of where to take up employment, it was clear that when opportunities arose young teachers in the Global South also opted for employment in urban areas.

Sharing Solutions to Common Challenges

The focus group discussions were guided by the principle of *sharing common challenges, learning from one another* as laid down by the Director during the opening session. In the context of this principle, the idea was not to transplant solutions from one context to another. Nevertheless, focus group discussions shared examples of how certain challenges were being handled in different contexts. This is done to provide participants with resources for reflections on their own contexts. This was evident during the reflection sessions that were held at the end of each day. Table 3 below provides an example of how participants shared solutions in relation to two problems that were seen to be common among them, namely, a) attracting and retaining young teachers; b) addressing resource challenges in rural schools.

Table 3

Sharing Solutions to Common Challenges

Challenges	Institution A	Institution B
Attracting and retaining young teachers in rural schools	● 4 days working week ● Study loan forgiveness ● Pay for master's degree ● Make people feel valued	● Hardship allowance ● Strengthen the idea of the cluster system
Under-resourcing of schools	● Preparing pre-service teachers on being innovative and creative, being smart in areas where there are no resources ● Student placement for teaching practice in rural schools ● Resource sharing among school districts (sharing administrators) ● Sharing equipment between schools	● Preparing pre-service teachers on being innovative and creative, being smart in areas where there are no resources ● Student placement for teaching practice in rural schools ● Closing uneconomical schools

While solutions were context specific, and may not be transplanted to other contexts, the solutions provided a basis for post-discussion reflections. For instance, in one reflection session participants drew three principles from the sharing of solutions to common problems. These principles were formulated as follows: a) leveraging the power of creativity and innovativeness in addressing rural challenges; b) using initiatives that do not always require funding (e.g. making people valued through means other than paying money); c) shifting mindsets from competition to collaboration (for instance, sharing of resources across a number of resource-challenged rural schools).

Discussion

While we acknowledge the need for systemic and structural geopolitical changes, as well as epistemic and other forms of decolonisation and dismantling of the Euro-American hegemony to see people and knowledge from the Global South valued and seen as equals, we argue that the foregoing presentation of data manifested the current partnership as an alternative model to traditional practices. More specifically, the “co-created mobility agenda” represented a radical departure from traditional practices where mobility agendas are often crafted in the Global North only to be handed down to partner institutions in the Global South to implement. Chasi (2020) describes this mainstream traditional approach as one that is based on “Northern desires rather than Southern needs” (p. 2).

While we do not claim that the partnership was operating fully on an equal basis, we argue that the “co-creation of the mobility agenda” constituted some form of initial steps towards what Chasi (2020, p. 2) refers to as a “mutuality in partnerships and a commitment to negotiate partnerships that are favorable to all partners involved, so that benefits and outcomes are a 50/50 thing.”

Furthermore, we argue that the various descriptors of the nature of the mobility curriculum represent a potential window of hope that could be exploited for possible departing from the dominant global epistemic system that privileges Euro-centric and North American universal hegemonic world views. The nature of the curriculum, as seen through its descriptors or principles suggest counter-hegemonic spaces within which participants from the Global South can navigate alternative partnerships that are aligned to local needs.

Also seen from the data is that the curriculum was not only developed in a collaborative and democratic process by all parties, but that it was also responsive to the needs of the parties, thus addressing the questions: whose needs and whose interests does the partnership serve? We argue that the choice of focus of the mobility partnership was in itself a manifestation of a mobility curriculum designed around the principle of responsiveness. Mobility participants, particularly those from Institution B, defined their context as largely rural. In the same vein, although based in an urban setting in the Global North, participants from Institution A saw their context as one that serve a largely rural clientele in the surrounding farming countryside.

Other principles of the mobility curriculum such as that of being “flexible” or “tentative” suggest a democratic model of cross-border academic mobility where curriculum is seen as a process. A “flexible” and “tentative” mobility curriculum further suggests a departure from traditional practices where curriculum is viewed as a finished product presented by the Global North to the Global South on the basis of “take-it-or-leave-it” by tying the curriculum to funding.

We also observe that Global North Institution A may not have been the best match for Global South Institution B to collaborate and learn from each other on matters of *strengthening rural education*. This is because the rural context in the home country of Institution A is different from the home country of Institution B. Another Global South institution with similar rural experiences may have been a better match for Institution B. As alluded to earlier, the choice of partner was tied to a Global North institution by the funding requirements.

However, despite the mismatch of rural contexts between the two partners, we argue that the observed practices such as a *co-created mobility agenda*; *sharing common challenges*, *learning from one another*, as well as the *sharing solutions to common challenges* were further manifestation of a mobility curriculum that has potential to recognize non-Western contexts. We conclude, based on our foregoing observations, that the mobility partnership suggested an open, participatory and welcoming model of cross-border academic mobility. In the next section, we outline the alternative model based on the foregoing discussion.

Towards The “Third Space” In Cross-Border Academic Mobility

We argue that the key features identified in the foregoing discussion locate the current cross-border academic mobility partnership outside the binarised or dichotomised discourse of the traditional Global North-South mobility spaces. The features position the current mobility partnership within an alternative space other than the dominant North-South spaces. The North-South *divide* is used in the context of the conceptual framework based on Giroux’s (1994) conceptualisation of home (North or South) as an ideological, cultural, and epistemic space despite its conjuring of physical space. The North-South *divide* is thus clarified:

[...] when we refer to South or North, there is not a clear, static division, not even a territorial division. The point is to highlight the ontological and epistemological rift, which is geopolitical. This division represents a geopolitical space guided by underlying logic that can be found physically in the North or the South (Martinez-Vargas, 2020, p. 117).

The traditional North-South mobility arrangements are viewed as Western-centric and colonial, legitimising, and perpetuating the unequal global knowledge structure. However, the cross-border academic mobility partnership presented in this study, as seen from its key features, suggests a different model. Borrowing from Zeichner et al. (2015, p. 129), we would like to term it as the *third space* model in cross-border academic mobility. We do not argue that the current cross-border academic mobility between the two institutions has fully attained this *third space*. Nevertheless, we contend that the partnership has exhibited some initial steps upon which construction of the *third space* model can be attained going forward.

The term *third space* is used to denote an alternative space from the two traditional spaces, namely, Global North and Global South. It denotes an all-inclusive, pluralistic space that is different from the two antagonistic spaces of the North-South discourse. We argue that the *third space* is consistent with the debates that have been going on over the past two decades such as decolonising academic mobility (Chasi, 2020), rebalancing North-South partnerships (Unkule, 2021; Fernanda, 2021), transformative internationalisation that is equity based (Jones, 2022), and

moving beyond Western approaches in theorising cross-border academic mobility (de Wit, 2024; de Wit, 2019). The *third space* is further consistent with mobility rationales for higher education institutions that are driven by cooperation and promotion of student learning as opposed to the reputational and prestige-based rationales.

The key principles of the mobility curriculum such as being *inclusive, participatory, responsive, flexible, and tentative*, suggest initial steps towards a “radical form of border crossing” (Giroux, 1994, p. 142). This is seen as participants taking leave of the spaces of privilege and power, or the spaces of subordination and oppression, apportioned to them by the current geopolitics of knowledge, and relocated into a new space, the *third space*. Similarly, views about a *co-created mobility agenda*, or those of *sharing common challenges, learning from one another* further implied potential windows of hope for navigating into a *third space* that is different from the traditional Global North-South partnerships where mobility agendas do not only conform to the desires of the Global North but are prescribed to the Global South, particularly as a precondition for receiving funding from the North.

The underpinning principles of the mobility curriculum suggested embracing the values of democracy and crossing into a new ideological, epistemological and cultural space other than the North or South spaces. The underpinning principles of the mobility curriculum, together with the common understanding of *sharing experiences, not providing answers* seen from the focus group discussions, suggest a form of border crossing either from the Global North or from the Global South spaces into a new space, namely, the *third space* in cross-border academic mobility.

Traditionally in the Global North-South spaces, cross-border academic mobility is characterised by vertical and hierarchical power relationships in knowledge creation and distribution. On the contrary, the underpinning principle of a *co-created mobility agenda* suggests power relationships in the knowledge structure that are based on *horizontal expertise* (Zeichner, et al., 2015, p. 127). In contrast to vertical expertise, the *third space* in cross-border academic mobility calls for *horizontal expertise*, where the unique knowledge and understanding brought by each participant to the collective activity is recognised and treated as equally valuable, relevant, and important. Zeichner, et al. describe the operations of horizontal expertise as,

[...] working collaboratively, these forms of expertise serve as a resource in joint problem-solving activity and helps individuals and groups find innovative solutions to the compelling dilemmas that characterise their everyday work life (2015, p. 128)

We argue that the cross-border academic mobility between the two institutions provided space where participants, in the form of horizontal expertise, served as resources for reflecting on challenges faced in the two contexts. While it was the common understanding that focus group discussions were not intended to provide answers or solutions, they provided a resource from which participants reflected on their own contexts and generated potential innovative solutions.

Another feature that we observe as an indicator of a potential shift towards the *third space* is the fact that the partnership provided an opportunity “to return the gaze” that is usually one-directional, Southwards bound from the North, In research partnerships, for example, the conventional gaze from the North to the South often involves the North being associated with knowledge and theory production, and the South being

relegated to field studies. This dynamic can be counterbalanced by Southern scholars doing research in and about the North. In doing so, they return the gaze (Chasi, 2020, p. 2).

The partnership provided a potential window for navigating the *third space* as it reversed the mainstream trend where scholars from the Global North conduct research on the Global South with participants from the Global South always relegated to sources of data. The current partnership departed from this arrangement as scholars from the Global South *returned the gaze* by collecting data in the Northern context. This feature is likely to be empowering of Global South scholars as opposed to the dis-empowering approaches where South scholars have nothing to offer other than data.

We conclude that given its key features, the cross-border academic mobility partnerships, entailed, on the one hand, the physical cross-border mobility of participants between the two institutions. On the other hand, it entailed an ideological, epistemic and cultural border-crossing where individual participants potentially relocated from their ideological and epistemic spaces to inhabit a new ideological, epistemic space (i.e., the third space) informed by a more democratic political economy of knowledge. Advocating for knowledge generated collaboratively in a democratic community, the new space radically departed from the colonising spaces characteristic of the Global North-South academic mobilities. We further argue that the *third space* model of cross-border academic mobility is likely to enhance learning and promote positive exchange of experiences.

While this was a single initiative that may have been more open, participatory and welcoming, we are aware of the fact much more efforts still have to be undertaken to make the world better. The initiative through this partnership is only a very small step in a very big world filled with overwhelming challenges. For instance, we take cognisance of the fact that, currently, the world is seemingly getting more and more ideologically divided, with the rise of the far right across Europe and white supremacy, and possible return of Trump in the United States, and the attacks on academic freedom, especially if scholars engage with or work with anything related to race, racism, racial injustice, colonialism, colonality and neocolonialism. All these challenges may impede or pose limitations for the future in terms of the shift towards the *third space* model while perpetuating the Global North-south model. However, despite the limitations, we believe that opportunities should be fully exploited when small steps such as those manifested in the current study avail themselves.

Given the shortfall of this study in terms of its scale and scope, we recommend that the issue of an alternative space in cross-border academic mobility be a subject of future research.

Conclusion

Given the key features, we concluded that the cross-border academic mobility under investigation was located outside of the Global North-South traditional mobility arrangements which are based on hierarchical and vertical power relationships in the production and distribution of knowledge. Instead, the features suggested a potential move towards the *third space* in cross-border academic mobility. Based on our analysis of the underpinning model, we position the *third space* as a model characterised by horizontal expertise and principles of democracy. The third space entailed boundary crossing not only in physical terms but also in abstract terms of the ideological, epistemological, theoretical, and cultural space.

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