

Afterword: Towards a More Just and Sustainable Research Practice

VET Africa 4.0 Collective

In a blog post some of us wrote about the project, [Monk et al \(2021b\)](#) argue that '[t]he conjuncture of a renewed decolonisation debate, the pandemic and greater climate action urgency provide a moment for revisiting long standing aspirations towards just and sustainable research practices'.

In this short afterword, we reflect critically on how we tried to move towards more just practices both internally and externally. We will start by considering our internal practices.

The project was a partnership between four research chairs, and the team also included one vice-chancellor and two others with leadership roles within their schools. This helped reduce power imbalances at least at senior levels within the project. Although it was heavily driven in the application phase by a prospective principal investigator (PI) from the northern partner institution, the intention was always to give the funder an 'honest enough' account of what the project would do, while leaving considerable latitude for the team to decide on this subsequently. The seniority of some team members from each country meant that all major decisions had to be negotiated. Importantly, the key conceptual framing of ecosystems was implicit in the proposal but was made central later, based on work already started by the Rhodes team, as reflected upon in [Chapter 9](#).

In the process of the project, there was a determination to maximize wider team involvement in decision making. A series of workshops punctuated the project, in Oxford, Gulu, Makhanda, Johannesburg, Kenton and online. Most team members participated in most of these events, and almost all travelled to at least one of the other two countries. However, presence is not the same as participation and, although attempts were made to run these events inclusively, existing power dynamics, of course, were not simply erased. At times, the meetings perhaps better resembled 'fish bowl' exercises in which an outer circle observed the discussions of an inner circle. As part of our practice, senior team members built a habit of checking in with

others informally between sessions on what they had observed and what their reflections were. A good example of our practice came in January 2020 when, based in the Eastern Cape, we moved from fieldwork visits to teaching sessions on theory, to the development of four case-based visual representations of Spours' model showing collaborative horizontalities, facilitating verticalities and mediation. In the latter exercise, it was the more junior researchers who took the lead, particularly where their crucial knowledge about local dynamics came to the fore.

Inevitably, imbalances of power of multiple kinds did still exist. The bulk of the money flowed from United Kingdom Research and Innovation (UKRI) through the University of Nottingham, and the PI and the university were ultimately responsible for reporting and accounting. National allocations of funding were negotiated by the senior team members and reflected the very different costs of doing things in different settings. UKRI made COVID-adjustment funding available only to Nottingham, a clear injustice. However, a significant underspend in Nottingham's travel budget, also due to COVID-19, meant that the national budgets in both Uganda and South Africa got five figure (sterling) boosts, although without an extension of time in which to spend this. This did, however, provide additional and much welcomed funding for global south postgraduate scholars who also found themselves under pressure due to COVID-19 challenges.

Inequalities in resources were not just a north-south thing. Gulu is a much younger university than either of its South African counterparts, and Uganda has not been able to fund higher education initiatives in anything like the same way as the South African Research Chairs' Initiative. Both South African partner teams were organized around such chairs and had an ability to cofund aspects of the project and subsidize staff time. That working for a northern funder should require such cofunding, however, is problematic. There was also no direct capturing of the southern investment from a funding and time perspective, which often shows equal or high levels of both in-kind and actual expenditure investment from the global south in such partnership initiatives. This is an important 'corrective measure' that would facilitate a stronger sense of two-way investment and, thus, more equitable partnership constitution, rather than one-way funded investments from institutions such as the Global Challenges Research Fund, although the latter is appreciated.

There was an ambition in the project to support research capacity development, acknowledging that both South African partners were already well resourced in this regard. A writing workshop was delivered by the PI for the junior members of the team, and he was a resource person for a South African early career vocational education and training (VET) researchers' conference, hosted by the University of the Western Cape, at which the wider cohort of Wits' doctoral VET researchers were present. Other senior staff

presented sessions for the wider team during the project's lifespan. Several of the more junior team members presented at conferences, both nationally and internationally, in so far as the distinction held in times of COVID. Several are working on journal articles jointly with senior team members, including some as lead authors. A number have received funding for further studies. Most notably, a Commonwealth Shared Scholarship allowed a team member who was a Rhodes doctoral student to spend a year in Nottingham, while one of the Gulu team went on to further studies at Wits.

You will have noticed that we describe the book as collectively authored and give 20 names in alphabetical order in the acknowledgements. You will also have seen that each chapter has a far smaller group of named authors. Both of these decisions were discussed and were not entirely unanimously supported. That the 20 of us were involved, though to different extents, is a fair reflection. Acknowledgement of this seemed preferable to the team as a whole to naming only some or announcing some hierarchy of involvement. Many of us would have also preferred not to have chapter author names. However, we decided that these were important for nonprofessorial colleagues who had been centrally involved in writing chapters, given the wider climate of performativity in universities internationally. These key chapter authors were relatively easy to identify, but we had more trouble over the notion of acknowledging editorial roles. While most of the team made some comments on draft chapters, a handful gave fuller editorial comments and even fewer did detailed editorial work across the book. The final decision was not to acknowledge these individuals directly and to see their work as collegial. It is also worth noting that this eventual editing was originally envisaged to be a more limited copyediting task as we had planned to get the core writing team together for a writing retreat. COVID-19 made this impossible, and so the editing process required more focus on tying the chapters more closely together. Delays and the ending of funding meant that only about half the team were active in this process, and only four of us did final reviews of the whole manuscript.

Turning to our external relations, as Monk et al wrote, 'Like VET itself, VET research in Africa has typically been extractive.' Much of VET research in Africa has been funded by international agencies or, in South Africa, by national government and local foundations. Indeed, several of us have done such research. However, we need to reflect that we often went into the field as the agents of the powerful, and that respondents perceived us thus. As Monk et al put it: 'Practitioners have largely believed that researchers exist to judge them, with most judgments being negative. This has generated a legacy of mistrust.' Moreover, such research has tended to take data away from the field and those whom it came from, to profit others in the wealthier parts of the south or, more usually, in the north.

The two more conventional VET case studies in this book did not fully escape from this extractive legacy. We came to the Hoima case because the PI had been the lead consultant for the Skills for Oil and Gas in Africa (SOGA) inception phase. His access to agency and oil company staff was important but clearly distorting of the research process. As there was an external evaluation of SOGA happening during our data-gathering phase, it was crucial to make it clear that we were not evaluating SOGA and were interested in it as part of a wider exploration of skills formation in the Albertine region. In eThekweni, we did not have any Wits staff on the ground, but one of our team was a well-known local industrial researcher. This again facilitated access to more senior and formalized contacts. However, in both cases we were far less grounded in the wider community or in the kinds of activities we were researching than was the case in Gulu and Alice. With limited embeddedness in the former two case study sites, lockdown constrained possibilities for trust building.

As will have become clear as you read the book, there was considerably greater embeddedness in the Alice and Gulu cases, which involved important elements of action research, both before and during the project. These point towards less extractive, more equitable ways of researching VET. In [Chapter 8](#), we talk about this as part of a process of developing a scholarship of engagement.

In David Monk's contribution to the UKFIET blog, he notes from his perspective as a lecturer in Gulu:

We decided from the outset that our research should practically contribute to youth livelihoods and community development by developing transdisciplinary and inclusive ecosystems of learning in VET, where research is but one component among many diverse learning needs.

For example, in Gulu, it became apparent that institutions are short of equipment such as tractors. So, we gathered together a diverse group of people from agriculture who decided on, developed and tested a pilot programme for tractor driving and repair. The process required negotiation among parties with diverse backgrounds and differing needs. NGOs, government, university, private sector, traditional cultural leaders and students were all involved. In the process of working through the research we debated curriculum reform, pedagogy and assessment, extension work and history of cooperatives, funding and programme development and initiated a longer-term partnership for learning and advocacy in VET. The learning here was primarily oriented towards learning how to learn together, and empowering local communities to experiment with new ideas without fear of failure. The practical application of the research was far more visible and engaging

for implementers than a policy document. We also gained credibility as did our findings of democratising overly hierarchical structures because we visibly engaged in democratising the research process ourselves. (Monk et al, 2021)

A similar scholarship of engagement characterized the work in Alice, which had a history of emergence since 2014 where a learning network formed involving multiple actors to address local challenges of water and food security among farmers who had been given back their land. The local agricultural institute, collaborating with universities in the vicinity, formed a social skills ecosystem that to this day continues its coengaged learning approach via both formal and informal means and means of boundary crossing between formal and informal learning institutions. This provided an emergent and grounded understanding of the potential for reflexively articulating this work over time within a social skills ecosystem approach as also reflected in earlier publications (Lotz-Sisitka and Pesanayi, 2020).

We found ourselves mirroring the social ecosystems approach in coming to operate within its mediation space between the vertical and the horizontal, with the research being led by anchor individuals in anchor institutions. The teams' combination of local and official knowledge allowed them to operate between formal and informal settings, and between national and local actors. Often, we needed to transgress the historically normative or 'proper' ways of acting to create

spaces within and between institutions in order to follow the needs of the situation, rather than the protocols of the bureaucracy. Often, this meant working at the fringes of institutional mandates, to create wriggle room for ourselves and other actors in order to come together to form new connective tissues and ideas of what VET could and should be. (Monk et al, 2021)

It also required substantial empathy and social innovation, and a willingness to cross traditional institutional and normative boundaries. Here we learned from Pesanayi's (2019a) work showing the significance of these boundary crossing learning processes, often motivated by empathy and processes of reflexively coming to understand the limitations of past models for contemporary needs and demands.

Collaborative processes always mean letting go of control, and the pandemic made this even more necessary. We had to let the project evolve, like an ecosystem, and we had to follow its turns and tempos, while remaining mindful of official funder timelines and requirements. In attempting to genuinely value multiple knowledges, we needed to unlearn and reflect on what we simply took for granted regarding who and what mattered.

As university researchers, we must find ways of balancing the immediacy of the funded project and the need for stronger and longer-lasting bonds in the locations in which we research, while also forming new, oftentimes nontraditional, relations across our institutions and our related partner networks. This is particularly challenging for northern researchers and will be even more so in the light of our slow awakening to what the environmental crisis means for fieldwork and for international travel more generally.