

# 23 years of South-North partnership within theological education

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## ABSTRACT

In our globalized world, cross-cultural and inter-continental partnerships are becoming the norm, making bridge-building an essential element for achieving long-term success. We use the cooperation of over 20 years between Unisa, South Africa, and GBFE, Northern Europe, as a case study. GBFE is a network of thirteen colleges within Europe. This cooperation is unique because the stronger partner is from South Africa. This reverse asymmetry is in some sense post-colonial. In this paper, we analyze the question: “What are the benefits and the challenges of a South-North cooperation within theological education? Where is bridge-building essential for the long-term success of the partnership and what can be learned for other partnerships in reflecting on the bridges that were built in this example?” For analyzing this partnership, we make use of the metaphors of “bridge-building” and “swinging bridges”: Firstly, a swinging bridge between South Africa and Northern Europe; secondly, bridge-building between theory and practice, between academia and church; thirdly, bridge-building between different denominations and traditions. The case study is embedded into a general discussion about decolonization and the globalization of theological education.

**Keywords:** Bridge-building; intercultural partnership; south-north partnership; decolonization; theory-praxis; inter-denominational; diversification gap; credibility gap.

## INTRODUCTION AND MOTIVATION<sup>1</sup>

This paper is an example of doing theology, which starts with experience (Green, 2012, p.41). The experience is the 23-year partnership between Unisa and GBFE.

In our globalized world, cross-cultural and inter-continental partnerships are becoming the norm. On a local level, due to the mass migrations that have taken place in the last decades and are taking place at present, multi-cultural churches, teams, and living environments predominate our work and life space.

We propose that bridge-building is an essential aspect of theological education in a globalized world. Due to the migration, even local churches are becoming more and more multicultural. Therefore, theology must become more intercultural. In the past, Western universities, often the former colonial powers, would set the standard for “good” theology, and theologians from the “third world” (a term used in those days) had to follow these standards to get accepted within the academic community. The “Western knowledge system” (Dreyer, 2017, p. 2) used to be the universal norm worldwide. This colonial approach has become paradoxical because presently the churches in the Western world are getting smaller and smaller and the churches in the South are growing.

Just to give an example from the field of Practical Theology: Practical Theology has its origin in Europe. But “although practical theology has since spread to many other parts of the world, including some postcolonial contexts (South America, Africa), it is still very much tied to its European past” (Dreyer, 2017, p.4). In the 20<sup>th</sup> century, German textbooks about Practical Theology only dealt with German-speaking authors, still pretending to cover the whole area of Practical Theology.<sup>2</sup> A positive exemption is the monograph of Grethlein, which has at least a small section on Practical Theology in the US (Grethlein, 2012, p. 116-134). We greatly appreciate that an *International Handbook on Practical Theology* was recently published in Germany, with many non-European authors and even a co-editor from South Africa (Weyel, Gräb, Lartey & Wepener 2022).

International cooperation in theological education contributes to the necessary process of internationalization of theology. In this paper, the twenty-year cooperation between Unisa (University of South Africa) and GBFE (Gesellschaft für Bildung und Forschung in Europa)<sup>3</sup> serves as a case study. The relationship between Unisa and GBFE is unique, in that it is a South-North relationship in which the “senior” partner is in the South (Africa) and the “junior” partner is located in the North (Europe). This means that the African partner has the power and responsibility to set the guidelines and the European partner exercises a level of flexibility to comply. During the 20<sup>th</sup> century, North-South partnerships were the norm where the “Northern” partner set the guidelines. Thus, it is new that the Southern partner has the power to set the rules. This ‘reverse’ asymmetry between Unisa and GBFE is in a sense post-colonial.

By analyzing this relationship, we strongly use the metaphor of a ‘bridge’. This metaphor will be introduced further below. Aspects of bridge-building and the practical implications are drawn from the long-standing inter-continental, intercultural partnership. We

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<sup>1</sup> This paper was presented at two different conferences, firstly at Bridge-Building leadership in a polarizing world, Leuven, 8-9 Oct 2021, and secondly, at the Christian Leadership Conference Sustainable leadership – in times of uncertainty, Oslo, 18-20 May 2022.

<sup>2</sup> We could give many examples, but we do not want to pillory any author here.

<sup>3</sup> see <http://gbfe.eu/home/>.

specifically ask two questions: “What are the benefits and the challenges of a South-North cooperation within theological education?” and “Where is bridge-building essential for the long-term success of the partnership, and what can be learned for other partnerships in reflecting on the bridges that were built in this example?”

We begin by introducing the partner and providing a basic background to the history and development of the relationship. This is followed by a section on the general situation of theological education in a global world. After this, the Unisa-GBFE partnership is critically analyzed by using the metaphor of a bridge. It is argued that three main bridges were built during this partnership. Then the challenges and obstacles to bridge-building in the partnership are discussed. The concluding section presents practical implications for bridge-building that contribute to long-term success.

It has to be noted that this article is neither an official Unisa-GBFE paper nor a GBFE paper. It expresses the view of the authors only, who are staff members at GBFE. The chapter was neither discussed with Unisa nor with other GBFE representatives. We thank our colleague Bernhard Ott, Switzerland, for providing information on ICETE and beyond. Special thanks to the anonymous reviewers for their effort and their helpful suggestions to improve the article.

## THE HISTORY OF THE PARTNERSHIP BETWEEN SOUTH AFRICA AND NORTHERN EUROPE

Unisa is one of the world’s 14 mega-universities. It started in 1873 as the University of Cape of the Good Hope in Cape Town as an examining body. This makes it the oldest university in the southern hemisphere. In 1916 it was renamed the University of South Africa and two years later the headquarters moved to Pretoria. “In 1946, Unisa formed the Division of External Studies (DES) which enabled it to become the first university of the world to offer degrees through independent study by correspondence” (Manson, 2019, p.xv). It became a university for students who were, for whatever reason, unable to attend full-time classes. This decision turned out to be trendsetting and successful (Manson, 2019, p. xv). Over 350,000 students are annually registered with Unisa.

GBFE is a network of colleges, founded in 1998. Its office is now in Gummersbach, near Cologne, Germany. Since January 2000 it has had a formal partnership with Unisa in Pretoria. The reasons for founding GBFE were pragmatic. In those days (1998) it was nearly impossible for evangelical and/or free church seminaries to get formal university accreditation in Germany. This has changed in the meantime but in those decades these seminars had to look for international cooperation abroad to provide their students with a recognized university degree. Many seminaries started a partnership with American universities. But often these universities only had a regional accreditation in the US and thus their degrees, in the eyes of the German authorities, were not recognized as the degrees being equivalent to German universities. The German authorities are quite strict concerning the acceptance of foreign degrees. Fortunately, Unisa was well accepted internationally (even according to German standards). The partnership with Unisa began in the Department of Missiology with Johannes Reimer, a Russian German theologian, who started his doctoral studies with the famous Unisa missiologist David Bosch. Reimer was later promoted by Unisa as professor extraordinarius, allowing him to supervise M&D students on Unisa’s behalf. He then founded GBFE so that the cooperation could go beyond his personal involvement in Missiology. In 2000 the first two colleges

joined GBFE. Today GBFE is a network of 13 colleges in Germany, Switzerland, Denmark, Norway, and Russia<sup>4</sup>.

The formal cooperation started in January 2000 (Saayman 2013:139). Its focus is on postgraduate studies, which includes Honours, Masters, and Doctoral studies. Since 2000 more than 350 postgraduate students have graduated from Unisa via GBFE. Although the focus has always been on Theology, students are also registered in Development Studies and Psychology.

Before we will have a closer and critical look at the Unisa-GBFE partnership, we would like to describe the general trend of theological education in a global world.

## THEOLOGICAL EDUCATION IN A GLOBALIZED, POLARIZED WORLD

A combination of developments on the global and continental levels have directly and indirectly influenced the motivation to form the inter-continental, inter-contextual partnership presented in this paper. The development of theological education in the past century, and, especially in the last four decades, has taken place on many levels of which the following three have had a significant influence: The global level under the World Council of Churches (WCC), the International Council of Evangelical Theological Education (ICETE) and the influence of the Bologna Process. Although the developments represent years of conferences, reflection, and change, as well as the writing of many papers and books, we will briefly focus on these influences to provide the foundation for the central topic of this presentation: Reflections on 20 years of bridge-building within theological education.

After laying the foundation for the development of theological education, some of the challenges in theological education in a globalized world as identified by the WCC and ICETE requiring bridge-building will be addressed.

### WCC

In 2010 the World Council of Churches (WCC) met in Edinburgh to reflect on the development of theological education over the past 100 years. The initial meeting of World Christianity in 1910 was an attempt to “develop an empirical world study and survey on the state of Christian education and theological education” (Werner, 2011, p. 92). The following issues developed into goals that were to be reached, and that the WCC analyzed a century later:

Missionaries were to be professionally qualified for the calling to work cross-culturally. This became the forerunner of the contextualization discussion that began in the 1960s. Centralized mission colleges were to replace denominational theological institutions. Theological education was to be presented in the language of the students, including the textbooks utilized in the classes. This was closely connected to the goal of teaching others to teach their own people in their own language. At that time, the West/North was encouraged to establish models of theological education that would appropriately serve the South.

During the period of a century, dramatic changes took place, one of these being the geographical shift of Christianity as seen in the following table. This shift is significant for the subject of international theological education partnerships, as it becomes obvious that the concentration of Christian churches has experienced an inversion from a geographical standpoint.

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<sup>4</sup> <https://gbfe.eu/colleges/>

**Table 1:** *Geographical concentration of Christians 1910 and 2010<sup>5</sup>*

Year	% Christians in Europe	% Christians in Africa	% Christians Global North	% Christian Asia
1910	66%	Less than 2%	Over 80%	2.4%
2010	26%	22%	Less than 40%	8.5%
2050		Major growth expected		

At the same time, the council concluded that there are still big challenges ahead and that the agenda is unfinished. This is due in part to the dramatic migrations that have taken place, especially in the last two decades, resulting in a shift in the contexts of previously relatively mono-cultural societies. A further issue is the shift from colonialism to decoloniality pressures, and a strong desire for the South to be independent of the West/North in their theological education. Traditional Western theological education came into question and theologians were pressured to re-think the context of theological education, especially as the Western/Northern models were no longer considered to be relevant in the South.

## ICETE

In the second half of the decade in 1980, the International Council for Evangelical Theological Education (ICETE) was formed. The well-renowned Lausanne movement in 1974 led to the initial steps in calling for the renewal of theological education. The Manifesto on the Renewal of Evangelical Theological Education was drafted in the 1980s. This Manifesto was evaluated, analyzed, and finalized in July 2022. The purpose of the Manifesto is:

It is our desire to reaffirm the call for renewal of theological education. More specifically, we take up the developments of the past decades, take into account present opportunities and challenges, and set out a vision and a commitment for theological education that will empower the Church and every Christian to participate in God's mission. This calling encompasses in all spheres of life, and in all cultures and contexts of the world. (ICETE, 2022, p. 7)

It attempts to identify certain gaps in theological education worldwide, many of which relate to the gaps that are identified by the WCC.

## Europe and the Bologna Process

In 1999 the famous meeting at the University of Bologna was attended by representatives from European governments. The purpose of the declaration that was approved at that time was to be committed to “promoting compatibility and transparency in the structures of European higher education, making mobility easier, and strengthening European competitiveness” (Ott, 2016, p. 75). The intention was to provide more flexibility between European countries and to increase the level of cooperation and ease of transferability between European educational institutions. Basically, this forced theologians of theological institutions, private and state, to rethink their theological educational systems. This also had an influence on the theological educational institutions with a focus on the practical training of students for the sole purpose of mission Dei, both in Europe and in missions globally.

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<sup>5</sup> Numbers are taken from Werner, 2011, p.93f

## THE METAPHOR OF A (SWINGING) BRIDGE

As pointed out in 1980 by Lakoff and Johnson (2003), our daily language is highly influenced by metaphors. The organizational theorist Gareth Morgan states: “The use of a metaphor serves to generate an image for studying a subject” (Morgan, 1980, p. 611). He has identified eight metaphors for organizational theory (Morgan, 1980, p. 613-616). There are many metaphors used to describe leadership (Jung, Kessler, Kretzschmar & Meier, 2019). “Experience is a crucial part of metaphor” (Krüger, 2019, p.14). And metaphors are a good tool to integrate our experience into academic discussions.

For this article, we opted for the metaphor “bridge-building” and especially “the swinging bridge”. The metaphor “bridge” is very old and very popular. As pointed out by Klein (2004), bridges are omnipresent and their physicality makes bridges common for metaphors. The metaphor of bridge-building is also very old as we see in the Latin term “pontifex maximus”, which is rooted in ancient Roman religion, and which became part of the official title of the Bishop of Rome in 1453. Today the metaphor of bridge-building is often used in intercultural settings, for example in pedagogy. “Building bridges has become a common metaphor to describe teacher’s work with intercultural understanding” (Skrefsrud, 2000, p. 152). Of course, as with any metaphor, the metaphor of bridge-building also has its shortcomings (Skrefsrud, 2000, p. 159). A bridge is a structure that enables different functions. It connects people who are at different places.

Bridges are built for transportation, mobility, and passage. ... They create a safe connection to places that might have been unknown because they were inaccessible. Therefore, building a bridge is about accessibility and connectivity. (Skrefsrud, 2000, p. 152)

There are many different sorts of bridges. The longest bridge in the world is the Danyang-Kunshan Grand Bridge, China, which opened in 2011, 164.8km long and stable enough for carrying fast trains. Very different, on the other hand, are the so-called swinging bridges, which usually are for pedestrians only. Some people feel uncomfortable when crossing a swinging bridge, some people even refuse to cross a swinging bridge. We think that the relationship between Unisa and GBFE can be best described as a swinging bridge. A certain level of flexibility is required to cross such bridges.

And it should be noted that we speak about bridges with traffic in both directions. Sometimes the metaphor of a bridge is used for a one-way direction, bringing people from an old area to a new area, or from the earthly life to a totally different life after death. The bridges we describe are two-way bridges. We discovered three main bridges that were erected during the partnership between Unisa and GBFE:

1. A bridge between South Africa and Northern Europe
2. A bridge between theory and practice
3. A bridge between different denominations and faith traditions

### **Bridge No. 1: A swinging bridge between South Africa and Northern Europe**

The purpose of the starting point was to get access to degrees awarded by Unisa. The direction of traffic on this bridge between South Africa and Northern Europe is interesting. In colonial times Europeans thought that knowledge had to go from Europe to the two-thirds world. In the Unisa-GBFE-cooperation the direction of educational regulations and knowledge flows from the South to the North. Major car manufacturers like Volkswagen and BMW have

factories in South Africa, but it is very clear that the blueprint for these cars comes from Germany. In the Unisa-GBFE model, the opposite occurs: The blueprint, i.e. the format for the M&D, comes from South Africa, and the M&D dissertations are then “produced” in Europe. The blueprint metaphor goes back to Willem Saayman, who was a professor at Unisa in Missiology and one of the fathers of the Unisa-GBFE relationship.<sup>6</sup> It has become a good metaphor for the cooperation between Unisa and GBFE (Naidu-Hoffmeester 2020).

Master and doctoral students were jointly supervised by a professor from GBFE and a professor from South Africa. This opened the horizon for the student – and for the supervisors as well. It was a learning curve for all involved because the supervisors from varying contexts would pose questions to the student from different perspectives, thus expanding the context of the student and that of the European supervisor. This was true for the South African counterparts as well, as they participated in the supervision and processes of students writing in a European context.

Furthermore, the academic partnership was expanded by co-authoring several articles or book chapters: for example, Volker Kessler (GBFE) and Louise Kretzschmar (Christian), as authors of “Christian Leadership as a trans-disciplinary field of study” (Kessler & Kretzschmar, 2015); or Johannes Reimer (GBFE) and Zuze Banda (Unisa) co-authoring, “Leadership in intercultural churches,” (Reimer & Banda 2017) In addition, from 2013 to 2022 eight international conferences were hosted together; some took place in South Africa, some in Northern Europe. This resulted in the publication of several academic books in joint co-operation with Unisa and GBFE, e.g. (Faix, Reimer & van Wyngaard, 2020)

In this partnership, Unisa contributes with the status as a recognized university and GBFE contributes with the experience of editing books and the relationship with European publishers. Unisa benefits in that especially young scholars can publish with renowned European academic publishers.

Building a bridge from South Africa to Northern Europe also means bridging two different cultures. Personal visits from Europeans in South Africa and vice versa helped to understand “the other side”. Sometimes these trips included visiting the historical attractions that have shaped the history and culture of both the South Africans and the Europeans. These activities led to a deeper understanding of each other, which contributed to the strength of the bridges built.

Bridge-Building Leadership is informed by theories of cross-cultural competence. Cross-cultural competence helps us to understand what it takes to work across and beyond traditional (cultural) boundaries. It focuses us on the need to unlearn before we can learn about a new culture, it privileges respectful curiosity, empathy, behavioral flexibility and sensitivity to others. (Sharpe, 2021)

Sharpe continues by stating that “a tolerance of ambiguity is central” for bridge-building leadership. Crossing a swinging bridge requires a high tolerance of ambiguity. Because of the cultural differences between South Africa and Northern Europe, some behavior or some actions led to an unintended swinging of the bridge. Thus, the swinging bridge proves to be a good illustration of this South-North-partnership with reversed roles. Further below, we will give examples that caused the bridge to swing.

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<sup>6</sup> Saayman mentioned it during a dinner celebrating the graduation of his doctoral student Martina Kessler, Pretoria, Oct 22, 2014.

## **Bridge no. 2: between theory and practice**

One crucial concept which GBFE learned from Unisa was how to do theology in context. Often universities in Northern Europe tended to work in an ivory tower (this is changing now). In South Africa, most professors of theology have always been involved in their local church. Thus, the questions - how does the theory fit into the context of my church and how does the theory relate to the experiences of my church - are very relevant. Kritzinger (2002) gives a good example in his article. Klippies Kritzinger was a professor of missiology at Unisa. His article is published in an academic journal, but the starting point is an experience that Kritzinger's spouse made in her Sunday School class (Kritzinger, 2002, p. 147-148). "Following the lead of the children" Kritzinger (p. 149) then develops a special *praxis-cycle*. It is a five-point cycle and an adaptation of the four-point *pastoral cycle* popularised earlier by Holland and Henriot (1980).

This South African way of doing theology was well-matched to the needs of GBFE. The majority of the GBFE students are studying part-time, and they are not interested in theory for the sake of theory, but in theory helping them in their practice. Many research topics were chosen out of the practice of the students. The students saw a deficit or a lack of knowledge and tried to find answers. Their special needs led to very interesting and relevant research topics. In August 2020 GBFE had a conference about the experiences and challenges of integrating theory and practice. The results were finally published in a special issue of a South African journal (Ott and Volker, 2021). Looking back on 23 years the GBFE approach could be well described as "Doing Theology" (cf. Green 2012).

## **Bridge no. 3: between denominations and faith traditions**

The first two bridges were built by intention from the early beginnings of the partnership. The third bridge just "happened." The network of GBFE includes colleges from different denominations and traditions. Colleges joined the network because they were seeking international accreditation. Some of these colleges are Bapto-Mennonites, some are Pentecostal; some are rooted in free church traditions, others are closely linked to the Lutheran churches, and one college belongs to the Seventh-Day-Adventist Church; some colleges are fairly old, following the traditional model of a Bible school, others are very young with alternative concepts of theological education. These students and teachers decided to work together and are co-operating with South African theologians who were greatly influenced by the (Dutch) Reformed tradition (Saayman, 2013, p. 141). Working together for two decades helped to build trust between believers of different churches.

The South African culture had a positive influence. Traditionally, "truth" is very important in German culture, whereas "relation" is very important in African culture. Thus, it used to be difficult for German theologians to work together if the people involved did not share the same beliefs and viewpoints. The interdenominational relationships at Unisa have always been much more relaxed. In the theological departments at Unisa the Dutch Reformed, Catholics, Baptists, Pentecostals and atheists work together. We think that this relaxed atmosphere helped GBFE focus on the similarities rather than on the differences within the network. Bernhard Ott, a board member at GBFE, once described GBFE as a "unique consortium of different institutes - it has succeeded in establishing a 'supra-denominational' profile" (Ott, 2018). Thus, as a side-effect, GBFE became a bridge-builder between different denominations and faith traditions.



## WHAT SETS THE BRIDGES SWINGING

As in every partnership, there are benefits and positive outcomes. At the same time, there are challenges in multicultural partnerships. Sometimes the bridge swings more intensely, and people get worried about losing their balance and falling down.

### Challenges to the South-North Bridge

Like South Africa in general, Unisa is in the midst of various transformation processes. This was and is still necessary with respect to the lasting effects of the Apartheid system. Traditionally, the Afrikaans-speaking theologians were oriented towards the Netherlands, Germany, and Switzerland. They used to read literature from Dutch/German/Swiss theologians and often participated in exchange programs. Thus, they knew the German culture very well and often could read German. This helped us enormously by setting up the partnership from 2000 to 2010 so that it would meet the needs in Germany and Switzerland. The new generation of theologians at Unisa is more inclined to the Anglo-Saxon world. Thus, they do not know Germany from personal experience. This creates some challenges, especially if students want to write their dissertation or thesis in German, which was not regarded as a problem during the first 15 years of the cooperation.

In addition, the older generation of theologians was seeking a dialogue with European theology. The newer generation is looking for decolonization and Africanization (Dreyer, 2017; Legodi, 2021). As a result, indigenous African languages are more valued than the German language, which is considered to be a colonial language. GBFE does not criticize this move. It just brings new challenges to the partnership and sets the bridge swinging.

### Challenges to the theory-practice bridge

As mentioned above, the majority of GBFE students are part-time students. They find themselves in a specific context in their daily work and are looking for a solution to the identified challenges, needing or wanting to achieve a necessary qualification. This sometimes brings a time challenge with it. Some students want quick results for their research questions. And it is sometimes difficult to convince them that they need good theories for finding a solid solution. In the article “A plea for leadership theories” Kessler discusses the challenge of how to teach theory to people who do not like theory or feel that they have no time for theory (Kessler, 2021). If students identify specific problems or challenges in their work, they are more likely to be open to various theories that could help to address the issues and provide a process for finding good solutions.

### Challenges to the denominational bridge

As mentioned above, the GBFE network has colleges from different faith traditions such as Lutheran, the Brethren movement, Pentecostal, and Seventh-Day-Adventist. In the past, these denominations have argued with each other. Thus, working together with a colleague from another denomination seems like heresy to some old friends of a college. Sometimes donors of a bible college A do not understand why this college now works together with college B from a different faith tradition and even with a “liberal” or secular university like Unisa. This creates a challenge for the school directors who then have to defend this decision to the donors.

The richness of the cross-cultural experience is, at the same time, challenged by the broad spectrum of denominations, not only in Europe but also in South Africa. Christians in

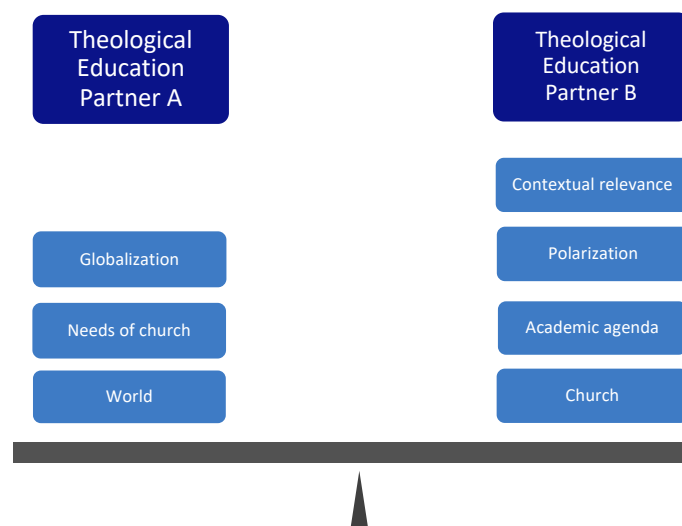
various cultures are challenged with different theological approaches or problems, and this also requires bridge-building for sustainability.

## PRACTICAL IMPLICATIONS FOR BRIDGE-BUILDING IN MULTI-CULTURAL PARTNERSHIPS

This paper focuses on bridge-building in theological education, specifically in a partnership that crosses cultural barriers and contexts. Just as the percentage of Christians in the West/North compared to the South has experienced an inversion from North to South, in the same way, the international partnerships are experiencing an inversion, of which the partnership presented in this paper is an example. The leaders in theological education who are responsible to form successful partnerships and to determine that the educational goals are reached, are challenged to build bridges from both sides of the gaps. The following diagram shows the precariousness of the “swinging bridge” and the ongoing balancing challenge for leaders on both sides. While balancing the cultural and educational differences, the leaders are challenged to understand the world context and how the church can contextually relate to the world. The church’s needs must be balanced with the academic agenda. Lastly, while globalization is bringing various cultures and contexts together because of migration and electronic communication (internet, travel, etc.), polarization is presenting itself as a parallel challenge.

Leaders of institutions for theological education have a responsibility to ensure the education of strong leaders who are capable of constructing strong bridges in the midst of these challenges. Effective theological education should produce trained leaders who are able to recognize and bridge the gaps that are the result of change over decades.

**Figure 1:** *Swinging bridge balancing challenges in inter-cultural partnerships*



In Figure 1 the arrow marks the middle of the bridge where a stable balance should be maintained to ensure that the issues on both sides of the partnership are being addressed. Stepping to the left or the right on the bridge could result in an imbalance, resulting in instability. So what can be learned about bridge-building for long-term success in multicultural partnerships?

## Share the purpose

Bridge-building must begin with a shared purpose so that “values, goals, and priorities can be realized” (Sharpe 2021). Inter-cultural partnerships in education require leaders to develop cross-cultural competence to be able to focus on building bridges across cultural differences that extend beyond personal cultural variances into educational cultural variances. It is of vital importance that the purpose – values, goals, and priorities – are clearly communicated and defined.

Recognize that the shared purpose might not be based on the fact that both sides want the same results, but rather that both sides want to profit from the cooperation. The bridge is built from both sides to “meet in the middle”. At the same time, both sides do not only build for a personal win but also for the win of the other side.

## Identify gaps that require bridges

First of all, there is the *diversification gap*, the challenge of migration and pluralization: The need for leaders and students of theology to learn how to bridge the diversification gap and to be able to relate to various contexts is becoming more and more evident, and urgent. No longer are churches mono-cultural – this increasing diversity presents challenges and, on the other hand, should also be considered as an enrichment.

Secondly, there is the *unity and credibility gap*, the challenge of disintegration and fragmentation of World Christianity: According to Werner the “denominational fragmentation in the international and regional landscape of theological education networks and institutions is greater than ever before in the history of Christianity” (Werner 2011:96). Never before have there been so many denominations. There is an attempt, not only by the WCC but also by the ICETE (International Council for Evangelical Theological Education) to bring together schools of various denominational backgrounds.

## Communicate and observe

According to the German system theorist Niklas Luhmann (Berghaus, 2011, p. 38&43), social systems have two activities: communicating and observing.

These two activities, communicating and observing, have been essential for the Unisa-GBFE-relationship and they are essential for building international bridges in general. We have communicated a lot, spent much time building personal relationships, shared successes and challenges, and we regularly observe what is happening. We are in a continuous feedback mode: If we say *x*, how does the other party react? And how do we have to react to this reaction? Sometimes unexpected reactions have cultural reasons and the reactions from one side or the other could be interpreted from a specific cultural context. The German leadership experts Blessin and Wick provide a concise summary of the essence of systemic leadership against the typical doer-myth of leadership:

So it is not: "A leader leads subordinates", but: "A leader changes himself or her behavior; this change in behavior is observed, interpreted and responded to by the subordinates on the basis of their programs and cause maps, and these responses are observed by the leader, who reacts to them, etc.". The doer myth stylizes leaders as

social engineers who view their subordinates as machines or objects for whose smooth functioning they are responsible.<sup>7</sup>

This describes exactly the kind of leadership needed by building bridges between different continents. In that case, it would be better to use the word “partners” instead of “subordinates”.

### **Build trust**

Building trust that allows open communication about differences. Never cease to communicate with each other about values, goals, and priorities. Be open to talk about the cultural and educational variances that obviously exist in inter-cultural partnerships, as Sharpe calls it: “contextual peculiarities” (Sharpe 2021).

### **Have the right attitude**

It is essential to maintain the attitude that just because the partner does it differently than I do does not mean it is wrong. It may not be right or wrong – just different. Bridge-building requires relationship-building which requires a learning attitude: Avoid the attitude: I will tell you how this should be done. Rather: Can you help me find a solution?

### **Be reflective**

Bridge-building is dynamic, not static, and thus it is important to be permanently reflective and to be reactive and adaptive in the partnership as well as in the actual requirements that theological education demands.

### **Learn about what is happening on the other side of the bridge.**

Bridge-builders are required to be informed and knowledgeable about what is happening on the opposite side of the gap: the history, the trends, the failures, successes, expectations, and challenges. That requires a high level of interest in the other and an investment of time and communication.

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<sup>7</sup> Original quote: “Es gilt also nicht: ‘Eine Führungskraft führt Unterstellte’, sondern: ‘Eine Führungskraft verändert sich oder ihr Verhalten; diese Verhaltensänderung wird von den Unterstellten auf der Basis ihrer Programme und Ursachenkarten beobachtet, interpretiert und beantwortet, und diese Antworten werden von der Führungskraft beobachtet, die darauf re-agierte etc.’ Der Macher-Mythos stilisiert Führungskräfte zu Sozialingenieuren, die ihre Unterstellten als Maschinen oder Objekte betrachten, für deren reibungsloses Funktionieren sie verantwortlich sind.” (Blessin & Wick, 2014, p. 210). Translated with DeepL

## CONCLUSION

In reflecting on the partnership in the case study we try to answer the research questions as described in the introduction: “What are the benefits and the challenges of a South-North cooperation within theological education?” Four major benefits that are coupled with the relevant challenges of a South-North cooperation can be identified.

First of all, both partners in the cooperation have the opportunity to achieve the goals that are beneficial and for which they entered the partnership. The challenge is for the partners on both sides of the bridge to keep the individual goals as well as the goals of the partner in focus for a win-win cooperation.

Secondly, both partners should view the partnership as a great privilege, opportunity, and enrichment to learn from each other. The challenge lies in maintaining a positive and open learning attitude and not to focus on only one way to reach a goal. This is not only true on the educational system level, but also on the inter-denominational level where a conglomeration of denominations meets and learns from each other, challenging each other in their thinking.

Thirdly, students have the opportunity to learn to combine and balance theory and practice on an academic level with the supervision and inputs from both European and African theologians, broadening their theological horizons. The challenge lies in the fact that the students must focus on the academics while working in the practice.

Finally, the inter-cultural experience in the co-operation is a broadening experience in which both sides have the opportunity to understand the other side and to find a way of working together. The challenge lies in being able to listen and communicate to understand why each partner thinks and works as he or she does.

The second question “Where is bridge-building essential for the long-term success of the partnership and what can be learned from other partnerships in reflecting on the bridges that were built in this example?” was answered in section 6 by pointing out seven elements: begin with a shared purpose so that values, goals, and priorities can be reached; identify gaps that require bridges; communicate and observe; build trust that allows open communication; keep an attitude check – what is right, what is wrong, is a compromise necessary?; stay reflective – the relationship is dynamic and must be constantly adjusted to remain sustainable; and learn about what is happening with your partner, and identify the issues on the other side of the bridge. How do they compare with my issues?

Bridging the gaps in the past has been challenging on the global level, as well as the international, intercontinental partnership level. On the one hand, if leadership cannot bridge the gaps, the result will be fragmentation of purpose and failure to achieve the goals in theological education. On the other hand, these partnerships, with the constantly changing dynamics and increasing diversity, are challenges that can lead to the richness of building strong bridges in theological education if the purposes of both sides can be shared, and the values, goals, and priorities can be achieved.

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