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Shaping academic practice through transnational research capacity building: 'It shaped how I look at the world'

Lene M. Madsen¹, Hanne Kirstine K. Adriansen²

¹University of Copenhagen, Copenhagen, Denmark ²Aarhus University, Copenhagen, Denmark

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Abstract: For the past 30 years, Danida (Danish International Development Assistance) has supported research capacity building of scholars in the Global South as a means of including them in the so-called global knowledge economy. This paper presents findings from a study that explores the experiences and reflections of various researchers from Africa involved in this type of research capacity building. It focuses on the implications of the involvement for the scholars' academic practice, work, and later career. Based on 14 qualitative interviews and a questionnaire distributed to 500 African former and present PhD- students, the study shows that learning critical thinking, flat social hierarchies, and discussing and sharing knowledge are pivotal for their current research practice. By using the notions *Geographies of scientific knowledge* and *Cultural production of an educated person*, the paper draws attentions to the situatedness of academic practice inherent in this type of transnational support for academic development.

Paper:

Background

For three decades, support for developing research capacity and partnerships in the Global South has been an element in Danish development cooperation funded by Danida. Inevitably, these projects are embedded in various types of coloniality, as revealed by the capacity-building discourse itself. Elsewhere, we have studied issues of coloniality in this type of international academic collaboration (Adriansen and Madsen, 2019; Madsen and Adriansen, 2019) including materiality and mobility of capacity building in a post-colonial perspective (Adriansen, 2019). This paper, in turn, shares insights from a large study focusing on the possibilities and challenges that scholars from Africa experience and reflect upon when being involved in research capacity building and shows how the involvement affect their academic practice, work and later career. The study was situated within the Nordic

literature on transnational research capacity building and post-colonial aspects of this within Higher education (Madsen, 2018; Madsen and Mählck, 2018; Zink, 2018; Felleson and Mählck, 2017; Mählck, 2016; Adriansen et al. 2016, Breidlid 2013; Holmardottir et al., 2013). The study only covered experiences of the scholars from the various African countries, not those of the involved Danes. In the following, we use the term 'African' to keep the anonymity of the involved from countries with few participants. Hence, the paper do not have a generic use of the term African intended to indicate a homogeneous continent without national, ethnic, or gender differences.

There is little knowledge about why individual African researchers choose to engage in research capacity building and how capacity building has influenced African scholars' knowledge production and wider life choices in a long-term perspective (exceptions being Møller-Jensen and Madsen 2015; Madsen 2018). Studying the individual outcomes of capacity building brings insights into the implied notions of doing 'good research' and the values promoted in Western research environments and wider society. Hence, this paper examines how taking part in an academic research environment in Denmark influences African scholars' academic practice, work, and later career.

Methodology and key concepts

We distributed a questionnaire to 500 present and former African participants in Danida funded capacity building and conducted qualitative interviews with 14 of them. The survey had about 50 questions concerning the respondents' current employment, research collaboration, publications and mobility. In total, 297 people completed the questionnaire, a response rate of 60% (see Madsen and Adriansen, 2019 for details). 70% of the total number of respondents were male and 30% female, which corresponds the gender composition of the total population of participants in Danida's projects. In the original study, we checked for gender differences, but there were so few that significant claims about gender cannot be made.

In analysing the empirical material, we draw on Livingstone's (2003) idea about the *geographies of scientific knowledge*. Through this, Livingstone (2003) shows how academic knowledge and practice is geographically situated. The geography of scientific knowledge gives us a framework for understanding how place and mobility between places is important in constructing what constitutes legitimate knowledge and 'the right academic practice' within a research field. We are also inspired by Levinson and Holland's (1996) concept *cultural production of the educated person*. We use this to understand how a 'good academic' is culturally produced in academia in Denmark and to identify research practices, values, and legitimate ways of thinking that shaped the involved African scholar's academic practice, work and later career.

Academic practices: shaping an academic

'I learned to be an independent thinker and a man of positive construction to advance science. I learned humility and open-mindedness.'

Our analysis show that the African scholars' experiences in Denmark consists of a variety of outcomes related to their academic practise. The various experiences are intertwined, but can be described in three broad categories: 1. Learning critical thinking and working independently, 2. Flat social

hierarchies, and 3. Discussing and sharing knowledge. These outcomes are closely associated with the scholars' involvement in a research group and the relationship with their PhD-supervisor(s).

Learning to be a critical thinker and to work independently as a researcher during their stay in Denmark comes out very strongly when the African scholars reflect on their experiences. Seeing critical thinking as an important academic skill is not unique to Danish academy. However, for the African interviewees, critical thinking and how this is practiced, was understood in the wider context of how they experienced the Danish society. Hence, in line with Livingstone's ideas, critical thinking was perceived to be geographically situated. Critical thinking was closely related to questioning and discussing research process and results. However, it also involved questioning the professors and being on a first name basis: *'In Denmark, we were encouraged to challenge the professors. I learned discipline, work ethics, critical thinking'*.

Being a critical thinker often related to an experience and description of Denmark as an informal, egalitarian society with relatively flat social hierarchies: *'In Denmark a professor is riding a bike. During classes, people are discussing issues, professors not imposing views on students. They are not wearing a tie to impose anything. The lack of hierarchy has always stayed with me'*. The flat social hierarchies were influential in the sense that it initiated and legitimised questioning what was taken for granted even when it entailed questioning older professors. Hence, the interviews revealed a certain cultural production of what it entails to be a critical thinker in research linked closely to the flat social hierarchies.

In the African scholars' descriptions, discussing and sharing knowledge is often highlighted as a 'new' academic practice. Charles is a case in point. In his own words, Charles had learned to 'reproduce knowledge' rather than create new knowledge at the university in his home country. Soon after he arrived at the University of Copenhagen, he realised that the system was different. The cultural production of a 'good academic' that Charles brought with him from his former academic environment was not appreciated. On top of learning new knowledge, he also had to learn a new academic practice. Being 'a good academic' in the Danish setting was closely related to questioning research process and results by discussion and sharing them. Charles also emphasised that freedom of thought was highly valued and certain ways of performing academic practice was legitimised.

Concluding remarks

According to the African scholars, mobility between the Global South and the Global North is an important prerequisite for achieving the above-mentioned findings. Through these stays, the scholars learned critical thinking, questioning the taken for granted, and the experience of relatively flat social hierarchies. Many adopted the Danish cultural production of a good academic. The question is how valuable this is for the scholars' academic practice when they return home? Does it make sense to adopt another cultural production of an academic? Can this be transformed or translated into useful academic practices at home? Hence, research capacity building also calls for a critical look into the implied ideas about whose standards counts and the situatedness of academic practice, work, and career.

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