Community-Engaged Learning in a European Universities Alliance: Reflections on Equality and Reciprocity Across Europe and Africa

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Abstract

Although local community-engaged learning (CEL) is increasingly common in higher education, international CEL (ICEL) remains much less common. Through an autoethnographic study, we reflect on the challenges and prospects of collaborating across Europe and Africa, particularly emphasizing equality and reciprocity. Our focus is the Capstone, an ICEL thesis project in the Master's in Global Challenges for Sustainability, a joint degree of the European Universities alliance CHARM-EU. We argue that achieving equality and reciprocity in ICEL requires (gradual) institutional and collaborative transformations that go beyond an individual ICEL exercise. Full equality may not be achievable; however, reciprocity can be fostered through exchanges between incentives, funding and resources, and decision-making. A balance is needed between regulatory freedom to experiment versus transparency and certainty of rules and regulations. We end with recommendations on how to achieve equality and reciprocity in ICEL, particularly within European Universities alliances.

Keywords: community-engaged learning, Global South, equality, reciprocity, European Universities alliances

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Community-engaged learning (CEL) is a form of experiential learning wherein students, staff, and societal stakeholders interact around real-world societal challenges. Students engaged in experiential learning participate in concrete experiences, reflective observation, abstract conceptualization, and active experimentation to acquire knowledge through transformative experiences (Kolb, 1984). CEL is increasingly used in higher education as a form of learning whereby students gain skills, competencies, and knowledge that they directly apply in collaboration with others (Seider & Novick, 2012). CEL has proven to not only enhance learning but also increase students' civic engagement and openness to diversity, an effect sometimes lasting even years after the exercise (Butin, 2006; Hou, 2014). CEL is most commonly focused on local challenges, in places and communities that students can easily access around their higher education institution (Sugawara et al., 2023).

International community-engaged learning (ICEL), whereby students focus on challenges taking place abroad and/or across borders, is much less commonly reported in the literature (Habashy et al., 2024). This type of CEL is nevertheless increasingly important due to the ever-rising interconnectedness of our world, with societal challenges that can rarely be isolated from what happens across national borders. ICEL has the potential to foster "think global, act local" attitudes and educate critically engaged global citizens to address the increasing number of societal and sustainability challenges around the world.

An important feature of (I)CEL is that not only students, but also societal stakeholders

benefit from the exercise through analyzing or addressing challenges and through joint learning. Reciprocity between students and societal stakeholders is key to this feature, with (a certain degree of) equal sharing of and contributing to knowledge, power, information, and involvement in (I)CEL (Butin, 2006; Davis et al., 2017; Hou, 2014; Mtawa, 2019). Reciprocity and equality in (I)CEL are challenging to achieve, particularly when partners have diverse backgrounds and levels of education, and when inequalities, including systemic inequalities, exist between them. Such diversity is especially common in ICEL. Although diversity can foster joint learning, codesign of education, and mutually beneficial impact, ICEL, compared to CEL, runs higher risks of exploitative relations wherein partners with more resources (knowledge, funds, etc.) have more decision-making power and gain more benefits than those with fewer resources. The higher the levels of inequality across partners, the more challenging it becomes to achieve optimal forms of reciprocity. The challenge is particularly acute in ICEL that involves partners in the Global North and the Global South. In this article, we reflect on the challenges and opportunities for reciprocity and equality in ICEL by studying a concrete case of ICEL that engages partners across Europe and the Global South.

We do so by focusing on a case of ICEL developed by the European Universities alliance CHARM-EU. European Universities alliances are increasingly important players in developing (I)CEL. They are a flagship initiative by the European Commission for alliances between higher education institutions across Europe "for the benefit of their students, staff and society" (European Commission, 2025, About the Initiative section). Although the more than 60 alliances that represent over 550 higher education institutions are very diverse, they all focus on collaborating with societal stakeholders to address societal challenges, including through (I)CEL. Many European Universities alliances strive to achieve equality and reciprocity in (I)CEL by building knowledge-creating teams that develop challenge-based education together with students, staff, and societal stakeholders across Europe (European Commission, 2025). European Universities alliances span across different (higher and middle income) regions in Europe, and some of them also collaborate with Global South partners. This scope of collaboration makes the work of European Universities alliances a novel and contemporaneous case to study reciprocity and equality in ICEL.

In this article, we study reciprocity and equality in the Capstone, an ICEL thesis project that constitutes the final phase of a joint degree program, the Master's in Global Challenges for Sustainability (CHARM-EU, n.d.-c). The Master's is run by CHARM-EU, a European Universities alliance of nine partners (University of Barcelona, Utrecht University, Trinity College Dublin, University of Montpellier, Eötvös Loránd University Budapest, Åbo Akademi University, Julius-Maximilians University Würzburg, Hochschule Ruhr West, and the University of Bergen) across eight countries in Europe. It is simultaneously taught in hybrid classrooms across the campuses of CHARM-EU partners. The program is transdisciplinary in nature, with students and staff from all disciplinary backgrounds collaborating with societal partners in coursework on various sustainability challenges. Historically, it has run for 1.5 years across the five founding partners (University of Barcelona, Utrecht University, Trinity College Dublin, University of Montpellier, and Eötvös Loránd University Budapest), with the Capstone being the third and final phase (September–February). Starting in September 2025, the Master's will run across all nine partners for a period of 2 years, with the Capstone running from February to July. In the Capstone, students from across CHARM-EU partner universities work in teams to analyze and address sustainability challenges that are submitted by societal stakeholders from Europe and beyond, such as businesses, NGOs, UN agencies, and social movements (CHARM-EU, n.d.-b). All sustainability challenges relate to the Sustainable Development Goals, with (so far) fieldwork across five European countries (Spain, France, the Netherlands, Hungary, and Ireland) and African countries (South Africa and Senegal). A number of criteria are set for Capstone challenges, for example, the need to relate to various dimensions of sustainable development (social, economic, and environmental), feasibility for students to analyze and address the challenge, and a link to broader societal issues. Challenges cover a wide range of topics, such as upscaling local food production, managing human–wildlife–livestock interactions, promoting the blue economy, and developing sustainable business strategies. (See CHARM-EU, n.d.-a, for an overview of the latest Capstone

challenges.) Since the Master's inception in September 2021, nearly 200 students from three cohorts have worked on sustainability challenges in 40 teams. During the 6-month Capstone phase, students are guided in their collaborative work in working sessions in hybrid classrooms across the participating university campuses. Students are also supervised individually and in teams by a supervisor from one of the universities, and work with one main societal stakeholder who has defined the challenge. The Capstone is a joint learning process among students, societal stakeholders, and staff, resulting in concrete Capstone products that stakeholders can use in addressing the sustainability challenge that stakeholders submitted. Although these Capstone products are team-based, they draw on students' individual theses that focus on subtopics within the larger Capstone challenge. The Capstone is designed and coordinated by a Capstone team comprising student representatives, educationalists, and academics from all participating universities.

This article zooms in on the Capstone challenge taking place in South Africa, which was submitted by the University of Pretoria. This challenge focuses on human-wildlife-livestock interactions in Kruger National Park, where a local research station from the University of Pretoria works in close collaboration with local communities in analyzing and improving local livestock and wildlife management.

The article is based on the experiences of the authors, who are key actors in the design and coordination of the Capstone. We use auto-ethnographic reflections on our experiences in developing and executing the Capstone for the first two cohorts. Our research objective is to analyze the challenges and prospects for equality and reciprocity in ICEL across Europe and the Global South, using the Capstone as a case study. In doing so, we contribute to this special issue's third theme of promoting equality and reciprocity in ICEL partnerships.

Our article is structured as follows. In the next section, we explain how we study reciprocity and equality in ICEL. After a brief Methodology section, we reflect on our experiences with equality and reciprocity in the CHARM-EU Capstone, in particular in South Africa. We end by reflecting on the opportunities for equality and reciprocity in ICEL and providing recommendations for European Universities alliances in fostering equality and reciprocity.

Conceptualizing Equality and Reciprocity in (I)CEL

Equality and reciprocity are common principles highlighted as the backbone for successful (I)CEL educational initiatives (Mtawa, 2019). Both embody the goal of moving away from hierarchical relationships between a receiver and giver (Lupas, 2021) and toward those where actors share an interest in working together for the common good (Bernal et al., 2004). The optimal form of reciprocity would be one wherein partners with diverse interests and perspectives join in a synergistic partnership that constitutes a new entity with decision-making power (Davis et al., 2017). From a didactic perspective, ensuring that students make connections between and within the values of equality and reciprocity (Morton et al., 2023) is key for their achievement of learning goals and competency acquisition.

Reciprocity is a key concept for (I)CEL partnerships, often examined in terms of Dostilio et al.'s (2012) orientations of exchange, influence, and generativity. Exchange, defined as "the interchange [or giving and receiving] of benefits, resources, or actions" (p. 19), is highly nuanced in each situation, and can be motivated by personal gain, collective interest, authority, or relationships, and be balanced or unbalanced, equitable or inequitable. Influence in reciprocity is complex, with interactions and relationships influenced by social, economic, and environmental factors. Generativity is linked to how the interrelatedness of individuals and the wider world can lead to institutional or collaborative transformations, and new ways of being and understanding. Together these orientations highlight the complex and multifaceted nature of reciprocity in (I)CEL initiatives.

Similar to reciprocity, equality is a complex principle due to differing stakeholder perspectives, experiences, inputs, and drivers; existing structural and participatory inequalities; and varying economic, cultural, societal, and political factors. Possible approaches to equality include respecting equal knowledge and experience provided by participants (Hartley et al., 2010), equality of access to knowledge outcomes (Garlick & Palmer, 2008), equality of methodology and implementation, equality of opportunities (Mtawa, 2019), and equality of funding (Chmelka et al., 2020). In essence, equality should be a long-term goal for (I)

CEL partnerships, and participants should be committed to fostering equality. In this article, we use the term "equality"—sameness of treatment in education—rather than "equity"—just allocation of (educational) benefits (Espinoza, 2007). We use the term "equality" as this is more aligned with the literature we draw on, and to maintain consistency with terms used in this special issue. We do acknowledge, however, that the term "equity" more closely aligns with the purpose and arguments of our article, in considering the diverse elements and benefits of ICEL partnerships for different partners across Europe and the Global South.

For the purposes of this article, we structure our Reflection section around the elements of equality in CEL defined by Lightbody (2017), namely power-sharing and representation, partnerships, bureaucracy, and funding and resources. We chose this framework since it is based on a large literature study around CEL and at the same time is presented as a practical guideline to enhance equality in CEL. As we center our analysis on Lightbody's equality framework, we show how the elements of this framework interrelate with dimensions of reciprocity discussed above.

Power-Sharing and Representation

We define equal power-sharing as sharing decision-making power over the design, execution, and (desired) impacts of CEL. Decision-making power can be shared among various members of staff from different universities, students, stakeholders, and/or community members. Although full equality in decision-making power is not always possible, actors involved in CEL should be engaged in meaningful ways to influence decisions, with transparency on how decisions are made and how they can be influenced (Lightbody, 2017). Equality is also crucial for reciprocal exchanges of resources and outcomes in that the influence of social and economic factors should be integrated and considered. Striving for equality in this way can lead to transformative and innovative decision-making power (Dostilio et al., 2012).

Equal representation in decision-making around CEL requires the authority to represent, inclusivity of representatives and representees, and accountability to representees. Inequality can arise when society (or a specific community) is not cohesive or homogeneous; when representatives self-select, often because they have more ways and means to invest in their representative roles; or when representatives exploit their roles rather than engaging in reciprocal exchanges of resources, knowledge, or benefits (Lightbody, 2017).

Partnerships

Equal partnerships are those wherein partners together decide on common visions, common goals, and common ways to reach them, in a collaboration that benefits all partners, with mutual openness and support. Equal partnerships are by definition reciprocal without "forced relations," "power struggles," or competition (Lightbody, 2017, p. 13). This type of reciprocal partnership can often facilitate transformations (or generativity) in partnership activities (Dostilio et al., 2012).

Bureaucracy

Challenges with bureaucracy have been highlighted in CEL initiatives, with the slow pace of university processes to allow for CEL commonly mentioned (Greenberg et al., 2020). Equality and reciprocity require a functioning bureaucracy that can ensure sufficient transparency and regulation of activities. It is important not only that bureaucracy benefits partners in equal ways, but also that partners have equal opportunities to work with or around the bureaucracy (Lightbody, 2017).

Funding and Resources

Equality and reciprocity in CEL require sufficient, timely, and shared funding. Inequality can arise when some actors can access funding or resources better than others, or if funding criteria benefit some partners or activities more than others (Lightbody, 2017).

The different elements identified by Lightbody above are closely interrelated. Power-sharing and representation, for example, are important to ensure that all partners can influence a well-functioning bureaucracy around CEL, and receive equal shares of funding and resources from CEL. Similarly, partnerships are often impossible without funding and resources and without a well-functioning bureaucracy that all partners can work with. Our Reflection section is structured around the elements of equality themselves; in the Conclusion section, we will reflect on their interconnections.

Methodology

Autoethnographic Approach

This study employs an autoethnographic methodology, leveraging the personal experiences and reflections of the authors. Autoethnography is a qualitative research method that blends autobiography and ethnography, allowing researchers to draw on their own lived experiences to gain insights into broader cultural, social, and institutional phenomena (Slade et al., 2020). Although traditionally an individual methodology, it has been increasingly used in collaborative and group contexts (Chang, 2013; Mack et al., 2021; Olmos-López & Tusting, 2020; Ratnapalan & Haldane, 2022). This approach is particularly suited for this study as it enables a deep, reflective analysis of our interactions and engagements within the European Universities alliance and across Global South partnerships in order to identify gaps and opportunities for equality and reciprocity in ICEL. All authors engaged in the autoethnographic reflections. They have been leading the development and execution of the Capstone and include the coordinators of the Capstone, educationalists, and South African supervisors of a Capstone challenge. The latter were employed by the University of Pretoria, which also acted as societal stakeholder for the Capstone challenge. Because our article primarily focuses on the challenges and opportunities for equality and reciprocity in (longer term) partnerships, we did not include reflections of students who were merely involved in a 3-month fieldwork exercise without engaging in (building) partnerships.

Using Gibbs's Reflective Cycle

To structure our reflections, we utilized Gibbs's reflective cycle, a well-established framework for experiential learning that promotes systematic thinking about phases of an experience (Grant et al., 2017). Gibbs's cycle includes six stages: description, feelings, evaluation, analysis, conclusion, and action plan (Gibbs, 1988). Each stage was used to structure a series of discussions among the authors in order to create consistency and opportunity for everyone to voice their perspectives on their ICEL Capstone experiences. The online discussions took place between April and June 2024, and were based on experiences from two cohorts of the Capstone (September 2022–February 2023 and September 2023–February 2024) involving about 120 students across 26 teams. The discussions were supported by an online Miro board in which the authors added and linked their reflections on the six stages. Miro boards are an online platform that allow easy collaboration around free-form ideas. In our case, the phases of the Gibbs cycle were used as a template and the internationally distributed team could use this space to discuss, add, and edit ideas together in real time during the meetings and asynchronously outside the meetings. The different stages of the cycle allowed for emergent themes and to think proactively about future actions. Before each meeting each member was asked to reflect individually using the current stage as guidance. These individual reflections were then shared and discussed online, updating the Miro board as appropriate. Our reflections in the analysis stage, as well as the presentation of the outcomes of all the stages (Reflection section), are structured around the above-mentioned elements of Lightbody (2017). Our autoethnographic reflections, however, were not priorly structured around these elements so as to enable "free" brainstorming without preconceived ideas. Thus, our reflections were categorized into Lightbody's elements only during the analysis stage of Gibbs's reflective cycle (see below).

The six stages of Gibbs's reflective cycle are as follows (see also Figure 1):

1. Description: In addition to noting the nature of the projects undertaken, we documented the specific activities and events that occurred during the Capstone projects. These included the formation of student teams, interactions between European and African partners, and the overall process of collaboration and knowledge exchange.

2. Feelings: We reflected on our emotional responses to various aspects of the ICEL experience. This stage encompassed our initial expectations, moments of frustration or satisfaction, and any emotional challenges faced during cross-cultural engagements.

3. Evaluation: We assessed what was positive and negative about the experience. This process involved critical reflection on the effectiveness of our collaboration, the degree of reciprocity achieved, and the impact of institutional and funding structures on the outcomes of the projects.

4. Analysis: We examined the underlying reasons for the successes and challenges encountered. This stage involved a deeper analysis of how cultural differences, institutional policies, and funding mechanisms influenced the ICEL activities and partnerships (Reflection section). We structured our Miro board and reflective discussions according to the elements of equality in CEL described by Lightbody (2017).

5. Conclusion: We derived conclusions from our reflective analysis, identifying key lessons learned about promoting equality and reciprocity in ICEL (Conclusion section). This included understanding the dynamics of intercontinental collaboration and recognizing areas needing improvement.

6. Action plan: Based on our conclusions, we formulated actionable recommendations for enhancing the effectiveness of ICEL within the European Universities alliance and in future international collaborations (Conclusion section). This plan addresses how to foster shared ownership, improve funding structures, and institutionalize support for ICEL across different continents.

Ethical Considerations

Given that all the authors were participants in this study, formal ethical approval was

Figure 1. Gibbs's Reflective Cycle
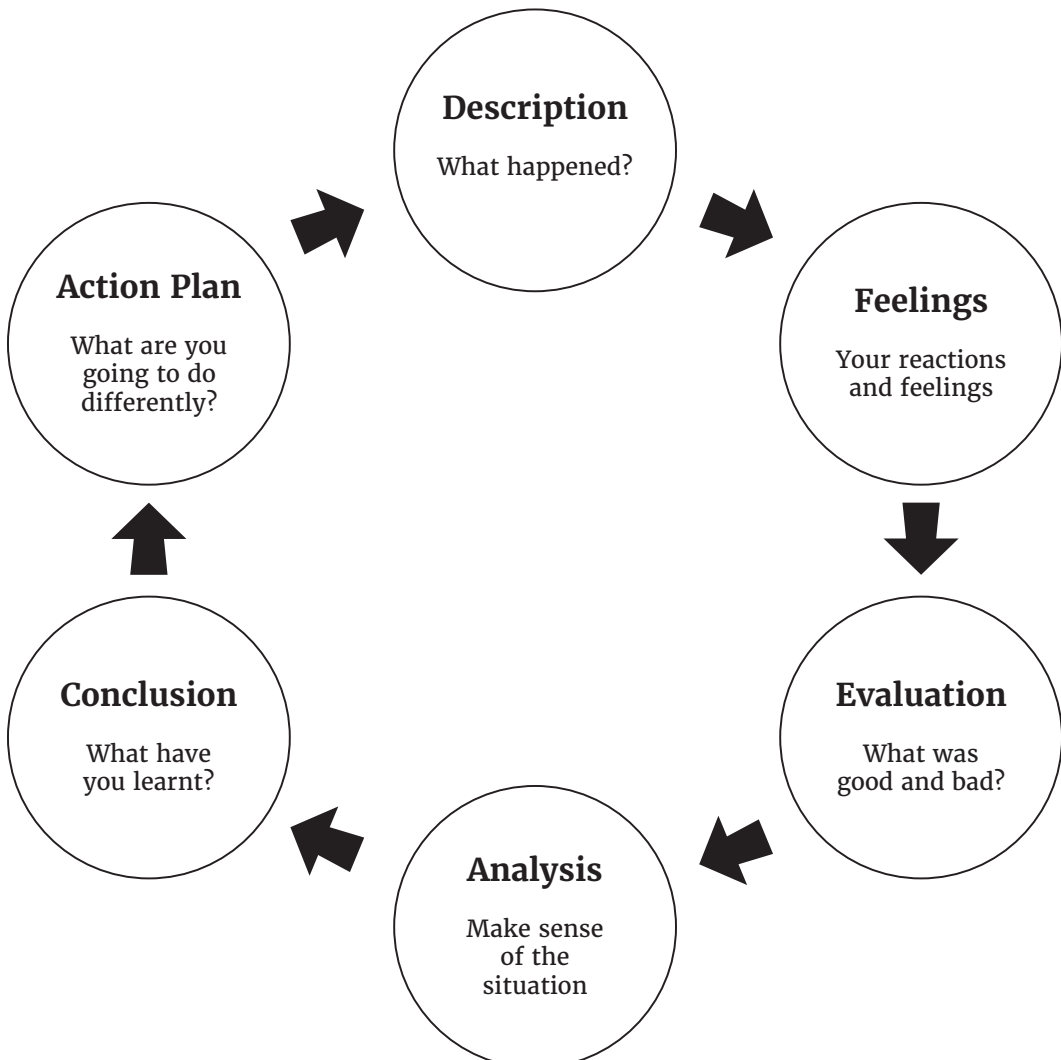
Note. Adapted from *Learning by Doing: A Guide to Teaching and Learning Methods*, by G. Gibbs, 1988, Further Education Unit, Oxford Polytechnic.

deemed unnecessary. However, we adhered to ethical guidelines for autoethnographic research, ensuring that our reflections and analyses were conducted with respect and sensitivity toward all individuals and communities involved in the ICEL Capstone projects. Anonymity and confidentiality were maintained, and our reflections focused on collective experiences rather than individual narratives to protect the privacy of students and staff (Lapadat, 2017).

Positionality and Bias

The authors are affiliated with two European universities (Utrecht University and Trinity College Dublin) and one South African university (the University of Pretoria), and have diverse personal backgrounds from Europe (the Netherlands, Germany, Ireland, and Spain), South Africa, India, and Indonesia. They thus represent three different continents across the Global North and South. Authors are also diverse in terms of their employment role, including academics, educationalists, and management staff from both inside and outside the CHARM-EU alliance. The authors acknowledge and recognize that their perceptions of equality and reciprocity are influenced and shaped by disciplinary backgrounds, personal experiences, and cultural views. Thus, our individual positionality influences this autoethnographic methodology, its analysis, and the reflections within. Specific biases such as Eurocentric academic norms; over-reliance on alliance structures; and personal definitions of reciprocity, equality, and equity were discussed, acknowledged, and interrogated.

Reflection: Equality and Reciprocity in CEL

To advance the narrative flow of the article, this section synthesizes the outputs from the analysis stage of Gibbs's cycle, which builds on both the shared individual reflections and joint discussion under the description, feelings, and evaluation stages. Although the initial stages were an open form to reflect on the experiences of the participants overall, it was deemed important to structure the analysis using common themes. Therefore, we followed a structure using the elements of equality in CEL as defined by Lightbody (2017) as a priori themes to structure the outputs of the analysis discussion and create a common language to categorize the outputs from the previous stages of Gibbs's cycle. These common threads are brought together in the following section, with the conclusion and action plan stages reported in the article's Conclusion section.

Power-Sharing and Representation

Decision-making power to design and execute the Capstone mostly rests with the Capstone team, with equal representation from each of the participating CHARM-EU partner universities. Most decisions are made by staff; however, the Capstone team also consists of student representatives, who are selected by the students. Stakeholders are not involved in decision-making around the Capstone, but have two ways to influence decisions. First, they codefine the sustainability challenges and desired products that students work on in the Capstone. Stakeholders, including from the Global South, thereby influence the content as well as desired impacts, without any prompts from the (European) university partners. Second, stakeholders are asked to provide feedback on the design of the Capstone. The feedback is, however, solicited after the end of the Capstone and in a format decided by the Capstone team, without transparency or follow-up on how this feedback is incorporated in the next version of the Capstone. This protocol limits the extent to which all stakeholders have decision-making influence, and thus ownership, over the design of the Capstone. Stakeholders often are content with this level of influence since higher education is not their core business. However, the stakeholder who submitted the Capstone challenge in South Africa was the University of Pretoria. In theory, the University of Pretoria has the resources—knowledge, skills, administration, and so on—to codesign and jointly execute the Capstone with the possibility for South African students to participate as part of their (elective) studies. However, the University of Pretoria can never be a full partner in CHARM-EU, as it lies outside the EU. Full equality is therefore not possible in the partnership's decision-making and funding distribution, a limitation that all European Universities alliances have to deal with in their collaborations with the Global South (see also the Conclusion section).

Partnerships

In terms of equal partnerships, CHARM-EU was jointly established by its five founding partners across five countries (Spain, Ireland, Hungary, France, and the

Netherlands). The founding partners started CHARM-EU by developing a common mission and vision, with core values and educational principles that lie at the heart of all CHARM-EU's educational and research programs. CHARM-EU has its own rules and regulations and governing bodies to direct (among others) the Master's and Capstone (i.e., graduation). CHARM-EU represents a very open and inclusive atmosphere in which diversity is highly valued, which is conducive to fostering (future) collaboration with and among partners. What the authors observed, however, is that the Capstone has not yet reached its full potential for fostering equal partnerships and is biased toward alliance-level structures. First, an open forum for Capstone stakeholders to meet and create new partnerships does not yet exist; all partnerships are forged among CHARM-EU partners and with (rather than between) the stakeholders. Second, CHARM-EU's strategy for sustainable, continuous, and deeper/broader partnerships with its partners from the Global South is still under development. Long-term partnerships are important to establish relations with a range of activities that are jointly developed, mutually beneficial, and reciprocal. Such potential development is especially relevant for the University of Pretoria, where options have been proposed but are yet to be started for integrating the Capstone into the university's existing educational and/or research programs. For such integration to happen, appropriate funding needs to be available (discussed in the Funding and Resources section below). A third important aspect in fostering equal partnerships is reciprocity in performing fieldwork for the Capstone. In CHARM-EU's collaboration with the University of Pretoria, student teams are sent to a research station of the Faculty of Veterinary Science in Kruger National Park, the Hans Hoheisen Wildlife Research Station. This research station focuses on research, community engagement, and training to analyze complex challenges and codesign sustainable solutions together with communities in the area. This collaboration forms an exemplary case of how universities can engage in transdisciplinary participatory research and education with strong local/regional connections. Hence, it fits well with CEL's approach and with the Capstone, wherein students codefine, analyze, and address a sustainability challenge together with stakeholders. However, students felt uncomfortable with the approach of flying into Kruger National Park from Europe for relatively short-term (3 months) fieldwork with limited interactions with South African researchers and local communities. They felt that it was hard to interact due to research fatigue among community members and their limited experience with codesigning research and reflecting on their positionality as researchers. A further challenge is that the Capstone group is not yet linked to local students who can support the sensemaking process or bridge the feeling of working on short-term projects with limited impact. Alignment between study and research programs across CHARM-EU and the University of Pretoria is currently being explored, which would promote joint and sustained knowledge production and utilization among students, researchers, and local communities (see also the Funding and Resources section).

Bureaucracy

The topic of bureaucracy generated the most reflections among the authors. We observed both a negative and a positive relation between levels of bureaucracy and equality/reciprocity. Capstone coordinators experienced a lack of rules and regulations in the first iteration of the Capstone (2022–2023). CHARM-EU was at the time still a fledgling alliance and thus had significant freedom and flexibility to design the Capstone and integrate a diversity of perspectives among students, staff, and stakeholders from Europe as well as the Global South. Minimal bureaucratic restrictions allowed for continuous and quick adaptations and improvements of the Capstone based on feedback and internal reflections of the team. At the same time, the lack of rules and regulations also reduced equality and reciprocity in ICEL. There was pressure to design and execute the Capstone in a short period of time, a lack of formal rules/procedures for consultation, uncertainty about the (evolving) rules and regulations, and a need for more coordination of CHARM-EU-wide stakeholder engagement. This necessitated a more directive approach with limited opportunities to consult with stakeholders and consider ways of building longer term, equal, and reciprocal partnerships. Stakeholders, including from the Global South, were able to submit sustainability challenges that students worked on during the Capstone; however, they had little opportunity to otherwise influence the design of the Capstone. Although a lack of rules and regulations can reduce reciprocity, a

plethora of rules and regulations can also make partnerships between Europe and the Global South more difficult. In particular, the need to take account of rules and regulations across five universities posed significant challenges on practical aspects such as insurance policies and channeling funding for fieldwork, which negatively affected the exchange of students between Europe and Africa. A slow bureaucracy, related to the complexity of operating from five universities, also resulted in delays in the distribution of travel grants to students, which negatively affected less affluent students.

As CHARM-EU becomes a more mature alliance, ICEL projects such as the Capstone also become increasingly institutionalized in each of the CHARM-EU partner universities, and better aligned with each partner's respective rules and regulations. This increasing institutionalization can facilitate equality and reciprocity in partnerships between CHARM-EU universities and the Global South, particularly in the field of generativity or institutional/collaborative transformations. Enhancing certainty and transparency around rules and regulations can aid equality and reciprocity; however, further institutionalization also runs the risk of making ICEL more rigid and bureaucratic and biased toward European institutional norms. These additional strictures can compromise the freedom and flexibility to codesign ICEL with various partners, including partners from the Global South.

Funding and Resources

With regard to funding, the authors observed that a lack of funding privileges the more resourceful partners or societal stakeholders who have the opportunity to make themselves available for student teams, and in some cases even provide funding for students' fieldwork during the Capstone. We observed the need for distributing such funding more equitably. Paradoxically, however, CHARM-EU's strong focus on equality and inclusivity can also be an impediment for equal partnerships with the Global South. Requests from stakeholders for additional funding to execute Capstone challenges were not granted because CHARM-EU does not want to favor some student teams over others in funding travel and fieldwork. This financial evenhandedness impedes opportunities for pilot projects with Capstone challenges in the Global South. Such pilots are justified and funded by CHARM-EU only when they come with a commitment of establishing longer term partnerships with Global South partners, which is the case for the University of Pretoria. The University of Pretoria also made institutional investments for the Capstone challenge, which strengthened the partnership and fostered reciprocity and joint ownership. Although the funding condition of commitment for long-term partnerships fosters strategic planning and longer term considerations of reciprocal and equal ICEL, strategies for partnerships are best built on a careful selection of pilots that are tested, optimized, and have shown success with partners that have a good track record. This procedure, however, requires the freedom to experiment with pilots without the burden of immediately linking them with longer term strategies. This conflict represents a dilemma in fostering partnerships for ICEL.

Also, in applying for external funding for collaborative education and research programs, the authors noted challenges in engaging with the Global South. European Universities alliances such as CHARM-EU heavily rely on EU-level funding, such as Erasmus+, Horizon2020, or Marie (Skłodowska) Curie actions. Criteria for such funding, however, often do not allow channeling funding to Global South partners. Most funding schemes focus on European-led education and research, the exchange of staff/students, or capacity-building in the Global South, rather than on building reciprocal long-term partnerships that bridge Europe and the Global South. ICEL with Global South partners therefore requires additional, separate funding, making it challenging to fully integrate Global South partners in the regular educational activities of CHARM-EU, for example, through codesigning (rather than only engaging in) ICEL. Such separate funding acquisition can, however, still be useful to initiate the first steps in aligning educational programs across Europe and the Global South. A recent application for student exchange funds from the French government, for example, would enable several students from the University of Pretoria to participate in and align their thesis projects with the Capstone. Although such exchanges are still small-scale and piecemeal, they can gradually develop into sustained partnerships, building on a patchwork of initiatives with various sources of funding from Europe and the Global South.

Although a lack of funding could be an impediment to sustained partnerships,

we observed that nonfunded partnerships could also occur through research barter, where high-quality research was carried out in a hybrid environment without being a transactional exercise involving funding or money. This option meant that CHARM-EU was not prescriptive about the problems to be solved and, unlike many funded projects, was conspicuously not driven by vested interests. The partnerships were instead initiated by the Global South when they submitted a challenge and became stakeholders in the Capstone challenge. The process and the ensuing solution were cocreated by the students and the stakeholders (from the Global South) organically, based on complementing mutual domains of expertise and skills, thereby enhancing reciprocity in the exchange. Here, the Global South partner was not the recipient of Western expertise but was a partner in a shared journey of solving sustainability challenges by combining perspectives, disciplines, and methodologies within a transdisciplinary framework reinforced by transnational collaboration. This process resonates with equitable and reciprocal partnerships, based on a balanced and organic sharing of power (or responsibility). The product synthesized during the process added to localized adaptation strategies with considerable geographical replicability, and the learning experience associated with it was consistent with challenge-based learning within a transdisciplinary framework.

A final important aspect of funding and resources that is relevant to mention is the allocation of hours for staff to work on the Capstone. Collaboration with societal stakeholders is highly time-consuming and expensive (Ramus, 2003). Societal stakeholders and their challenges need to be found and verified, stakeholders' expectations need to be clarified and matched with the coursework, and students need to be guided in their interactions with stakeholders. As indicated above, partnerships with the Global South require special attention. These requirements are not always reflected in the hours allocated to staff for work on the Capstone. Time availability was limited and unequally divided across the CHARM-EU partners, and staff at the University of Pretoria received no hours or funding. This lack of resources made it hard to equally distribute decision-making power and responsibilities, which mostly rested with those who had (official and/or free) hours to dedicate to the Capstone, especially the Capstone coordinators at Utrecht University.

Conclusion

In this article, we reflected on the challenges and opportunities in fostering equality and reciprocity in international community-engaged learning, which can be particularly challenging across countries with (systemic) inequalities, such as between Europe and Africa. We drew on an example of an ICEL project by the European Universities alliance CHARM-EU, which collaborated with the University of Pretoria in its joint degree Master's program.

European Universities alliances, through their collaborative structure and room for educational innovation, provide a focal point for ICEL. Their growth in number and influence over the past years (Kanniainen & Pekkola, 2023) invites a reflection on learnings that could benefit ICEL more widely. We have shown that European Universities alliances such as CHARM-EU can provide unique and innovative institutional infrastructures that have the potential to foster equality and reciprocity in ICEL. The long-term partnerships established as part of the alliance are a central component in achieving equality and reciprocity. In its initial phase of institutional freedom, CHARM-EU has seen particular opportunities in terms of creative space and room for ICEL but also dangers of inequality in the distribution of responsibilities and workload and implicit (knowledge) hierarchies caused by a lack of institutionalized procedures. The maturing and growth of the CHARM-EU alliance now brings along new (potential) challenges in terms of increasing bureaucracy that must be accounted for. In light of the increasing number of partners in the alliance, which many European Universities alliances are currently dealing with, a key challenge will be reducing complexity and enhancing transparency in procedures.

Generativity (or reciprocal institutional/collaborative transformations) seems to be key in fostering equality and reciprocity in ICEL. Reaching full equality in ICEL across the Global North and South is highly challenging, if not impossible. In European Universities alliances, partners outside the EU cannot receive the same (EU) funding and cannot become full partners with decision-making power in the alliance. However, some degree of reciprocity can be attained by allowing non-EU partners to tap into different kinds of opportunities, or add-ons to the collaborative ICEL project. In collaborating with CHARM-EU, for example, the University of

Pretoria got involved not only in the Capstone phase, but also in coauthoring publications, in small-scale student exchanges, in developing an Erasmus+ exchange grant, and in committees to codesign CHARM-EU's external relations strategy. This example of collaboration shows that ICEL, with its equality and reciprocity, should be considered not a standalone exercise, but rather one part of longer term collaborative transformations in the educational relations across countries and universities with a patchwork of initiatives and sources of funding. That said, in order to realize the European Union's goal of enhanced and sustained collaboration in research and innovation across Africa and Europe (EC & AU, 2023), the European Union would do well to restructure some of its criteria for funding to foster longer term and reciprocal partnerships across African and European partners.

Although the above-mentioned add-ons or patchwork of initiatives do not immediately lead to institutional or collaborative transformations, they can be gradually institutionalized, thereby slowly leading to higher degrees of reciprocity. The University of Pretoria, for example, initially regarded the Capstone as a fairly isolated small-scale ICEL project, but gradually realized that the collaboration with CHARM-EU generates long-term opportunities with potential strategic redirections and additional capacity for North–South exchanges. The University has since sought an academic home for its collaboration with CHARM-EU within one of its faculties. This change in administering ICEL, which initially took place from the University's Strategic Partnership Office, can help to place the collaboration more squarely in the organization and eventually lead to institutional and/or collaborative transformations. As we argued above, funding can help in this regard but is not always necessary or even desirable, given the possibilities for barters and reciprocal arrangements, what we earlier called research barters.

To identify possibilities for such barters and more broadly advance equality and reciprocity, we recommend that ICEL exercises be accompanied by reflective exercises such as the one we used for this article. We found that making the individual elements of equality and reciprocity explicit through Lightbody's (2017) framework (power-sharing, representation, partnerships,

and funding/resources) was very helpful in identifying gaps and opportunities for equality and reciprocity in ICEL. Although reflection on these individual elements was useful, seeing all these elements together as a holistic whole, and identifying possibilities for exchanges between the elements, can also help in sustaining long-term equality and reciprocity in the development, implementation, and optimization of ICEL. In addition, addressing personal biases, positionalities, and assumptions during this reflection in an open and supportive manner is key to providing depth and nuance in critical engagement within and between topics. In reflecting on Lightbody's elements for CEL, we noticed scant attention for positionality and biases. These factors are particularly but not exclusively important in international CEL projects where inequalities, sometimes systemic, exist between partners. In our case, not only did the authors use Gibbs's reflective cycle to write this article; students also are asked to use the cycle to reflect on their personal and professional development, positionality, and biases in all phases (including the Capstone) of the Master's. We therefore recommend that reflective exercises are incorporated into any (I)CEL exercise among both staff and students, including with a specific focus on equality and reciprocity.

Ultimately, equality and reciprocity in ICEL do not arise from providing identical benefits to all partners, but rather from partners jointly deciding on a fair distribution of the various benefits that are most valuable to the different partners. Making this allocation necessitates continuous reflections on the feasibility and desirability of sharing decision-making power, funding, and resources, with possibilities of exchanges between these assets to realize reciprocal and holistically equitable and long-term partnerships in ICEL.

To end this article, we reflect on the final stage of Gibbs's reflective cycle, the action plan. Translating the insights of this article into practical steps, we propose the following action plan for ICEL projects:

1. Establish clear reflective processes:

   • Integrate structured reflective exercises (e.g., using Gibbs's reflective cycle) for all participants, including both staff and students.

- Schedule regular reflection sessions to monitor and adjust practices related to equality and reciprocity.

- Consider all elements of CEL (power-sharing, representation, partnerships, and funding/resources) in order to manage each ICEL project as a holistic whole that can generate different benefits for different partners.

- Define personal biases and positionality at the start of the process, and ensure that these biases are considered throughout the ICEL project.

2. Formalize collaborative procedures:

    - Develop and implement procedures to ensure balanced responsibilities and transparent decision-making.

    - Create guidelines for resource sharing and power distribution that can be tailored to different partnership contexts.

3. Foster reciprocal opportunities:

    - Identify and promote alternative opportunities for non-EU partners (such as research barters and collaborative add-ons) to ensure meaningful engagement.

    - Encourage partners to jointly design strategies for resource allocation and capacity building.

4. Monitor and adjust governance structures:

    - Regularly assess the alliance's administrative and bureaucratic processes to reduce complexity and enhance transparency.

    - Implement feedback mechanisms to capture and address emerging challenges as the alliance grows.

By jointly deciding on a fair distribution of benefits and continuously reflecting on the effectiveness of these strategies, European Universities alliances can pave the way for long-term, equitable, and reciprocal collaborations in ICEL.

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