

## AUTHOR:

Prof L. Jacobs<sup>1</sup>  
 Prof K. Wimpenny<sup>2</sup>  
 L. Mitchell<sup>3</sup>  
 C. Hagenmeier<sup>1</sup>  
 Prof J. Beelen<sup>4</sup>  
 M. Hodges<sup>1</sup>  
 V. George<sup>1</sup>  
 Dr A. DeWinter<sup>2</sup>  
 C. Slambee<sup>1</sup>  
 Dr S. Obadire<sup>8</sup>  
 Prof A. Viviani<sup>5</sup>  
 Dr L. Samuels<sup>6</sup>  
 L.M. Jackson<sup>7</sup>  
 R. Klamer<sup>4</sup>  
 N. Adam<sup>1</sup>

## AFFILIATION:

<sup>1</sup>University of the Free State,  
 South Africa  
<sup>2</sup>Coventry University, UK  
<sup>3</sup>University of Limpopo,  
 South Africa  
<sup>4</sup>The Hague University of Applied  
 Sciences, Netherlands  
<sup>5</sup>Siena University, Italy  
<sup>6</sup>Durban University of  
 Technology, South Africa  
<sup>7</sup>Central University of  
 Technology, Bloemfontein,  
 South Africa  
<sup>8</sup>University of Venda,  
 South Africa

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# ADAPTING A CAPACITY- DEVELOPMENT-IN-HIGHER- EDUCATION PROJECT: DOING, BEING AND BECOMING VIRTUAL COLLABORATION

## ABSTRACT

*In November 2019, scholars and practitioners from ten higher education institutions celebrated the launch of the iKudu project. This project, co-funded by Erasmus+, focuses on capacity development for curriculum transformation through internationalisation and development of Collaborative Online International Learning (COIL) virtual exchange. Detailed plans for 2020 were discussed including a series of site visits and face-to-face training. However, the realities of the COVID-19 pandemic disrupted the plans in ways that could not have been foreseen and new ways of thinking and doing came to the fore. Writing from an insider perspective as project partners, in this paper we draw from appreciative inquiry, using a metaphor of a mosaic as our identity, to first provide the background on the iKudu project before sharing the impact of the pandemic on the project's adapted approach. We then discuss how alongside the focus of iKudu in the delivery of an internationalised and transformed curriculum using COIL, we have, by our very approach as project partners, adopted the principles of COIL exchange. A positive impact of the pandemic was that COIL offered a consciousness raising activity, which we suggest could be used more broadly in order to help academics think about international research practice partnerships, and, as in our situation, how internationalised and decolonised curriculum practices might be approached.*

Keywords: COVID-19; internationalisation of higher education; decolonisation; COIL; virtual exchange; Erasmus+.

## 1. INTRODUCTION AND BACKGROUND

It is essential for Higher Education (HE) to stay at the forefront of knowledge production and knowledge transfer as well as to prepare students for the ever-changing future. Curricula should focus on global knowledge and competences, but at the same time ensure local relevance (Canen *et al.*, 2014; Niemczyk, 2019). Niemczyk (2019:11) argues that “relying solely on the notion of globalisation is limiting, since it neglects the complex interconnection between the global

1 KA2 Erasmus+ Cooperation for innovation and the exchange of good practices (capacity building in the field of Higher Education)

and the local as well as existing power dynamics between the two notions". Higher education institutions (HEIs) should thus develop competences in students "to recognize [themselves] in the narrative of the interconnected world as well as local realities" (Niemczyk, 2019: 13). It is thus necessary to develop capacity to create internationalisation opportunities that are inclusive and contextualised (de Wit & Altbach, 2020). HEIs should offer internationalised curricula and provide students with internationalised learning experiences, but in ways that embrace locality and diversity, and enable transformation (Mheta *et al.*, 2018).

Internationalised learning experiences in HE since the previous century largely depended on student exchange (de Wit & Altbach, 2020). These were mostly the result of some form of relationship between institutions, be it at the level of formal partnership agreement, or collaboration between individual academics at the institutions. Indeed, Beelen *et al.* (2021: forthcoming) argue that "[t]he discourse promoting international mobility has always tended to be viewed as the most dynamic aspect of the internationalisation of universities, however, the increasing focus on the home curriculum is to a large extent a response to the fact that education abroad is limited to a minority of students". In order to be increasingly inclusive, and close the divide between the mobile few and the grounded many it is essential to find new ways to internationalise HE that will recognise the value of differences, and promote inclusion not only of people, but also of diverse knowledge systems, pedagogies and frameworks of thinking.

Collaborative Online International Learning (COIL), also called virtual exchange, is a viable and affordable option to provide students from diverse contexts to interact and learn together (Villar-Onrubia & Rajpal, 2016). COIL has been described as "not a technology, or a technology platform, but a new approach to teaching and learning which provides faculty and students the ability to communicate directly and immediately with their peers far away" (Rubin, 2020; Rubin, 2016: 134). Although certain basic equipment is needed, its success largely depends on establishing a sustainable relationship between colleagues from different HEIs, and the human capacity and technological support to make a success. Building such capacity is urgent and essential, and this was recognised by the EU funding structure when they awarded a Capacity Building in Higher Education Erasmus+ grant to a consortium of HEIs, and significantly, under the leadership of a South African (SA) university which is as far as we are aware, unprecedented.

## 1.1 Starting as an IMPALA and Growing into an iKudu

iKudu was built on the IMPALA project that was conceptualised in the Kruger National Park in 2015. The name IMPALA is derived from International Modernisation Project for Academics, Leaders and Administrators and this 3-year project, which concluded in 2018, brought together four previously disadvantaged HEIs from South Africa (SA) and five European (EU) partners. The project name was inspired by the Impala antelope, after the European proposal writer observed its social cohesiveness, yet individualistic survival response. The project focused on the modernisation of curriculum and university management with particular attention on Internationalisation of the Curriculum (IoC), including COIL exchange (PC on 6 November 2020).

In the IMPALA project, it became evident that limitations existed in terms of the capacity to implement COIL in SA, even though one of the outcomes of the project was a fully equipped COIL laboratory at each of the SA partner institutions. As one of the participants shared in a written communication with the first author (PC on 22 October 2020):

During this phase we decided that the IMPALA should evolve into a bigger animal, namely a Kudu [iKudu in isiZulu]. We thus decided that we should focus and enhance one THEME within the IMPALA project, that theme was Internationalisation of the Curriculum, of which Cooperative Online International Learning (COIL), was a subtheme.

The iKudu project<sup>2</sup> was then conceptualised to develop a contextualised SAn concept of IoC, which includes COIL. The project intends to connect large numbers of students utilising digital technology, thereby allowing students to gain international exposure irrespective of locality, socio-economic background, gender or disability status. It extends an international opportunity to a much broader pool of students at universities and can thus be considered an innovative and sustainable way to implement internationalisation of the home curriculum, by infusing an international dimension into the formal and informal curriculum of students whilst remaining in their domestic learning environment. The intention of the iKudu project is to furthermore integrate African indigenous knowledge and draw on classroom diversity to contextualise it, but also to decolonise the curriculum. Internationalised and transformed curricula, which integrate COIL as an articulation of virtual exchange, are thus a new model for HE teaching and learning that allows all students to develop the graduate attributes required for success and employability in a globalised world while validating one's own and each other's distinctiveness.

In line with the focus of the Erasmus+ funding, staff capacity development is at the heart of the iKudu project, seeking to produce a group of proficient teaching staff who will have access to an international and local pool of knowledge, skills and expertise in the relevant areas within the consortium that consists of five SAn HEIs and five EU partners. Hence, the iKudu project also aims at improving the management and operation strategies of the SAn partner universities by addressing the process of internationalisation and supporting equity and democratisation of HE in internationalisation. It seeks to develop capacity for governance, strategic planning and management of HEIs relevant to internationalisation. Pursuant to their complexity of working in a network, a sophisticated management structure was required (Hudzik, 2015) and indeed, such a structure was established.

At the end of November 2019, scholars and practitioners from the partner institutions celebrated the launch of the iKudu project on the campus of the coordinator. We discussed detailed plans for 2020 including a series of site visits and face-to-face training. The management was divided into two working groups (WG). Specifically, WG1 was tasked to do an as-is analysis of curriculum internationalisation and relevant existing policy frameworks at SAn partner universities in this year and provisional dates were set for site visits. WG2 was due to do the training of teaching staff at one of the SAn universities and start with the first round of "COILing" in a set number of partnerships. However, the realities of the pandemic disrupted the plans in ways that could not have been foreseen and new ways of thinking and doing came to the fore. International travel and face-to-face meetings were no longer possible, even travelling within the borders of South Africa was off-limits for a long time. In this paper, we thus reflect on how the pandemic required us to reshape our thinking and practices to enable new ways of engaging in an international capacity development project.

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<sup>2</sup> For detail visit <https://www.ufs.ac.za/iKudu>

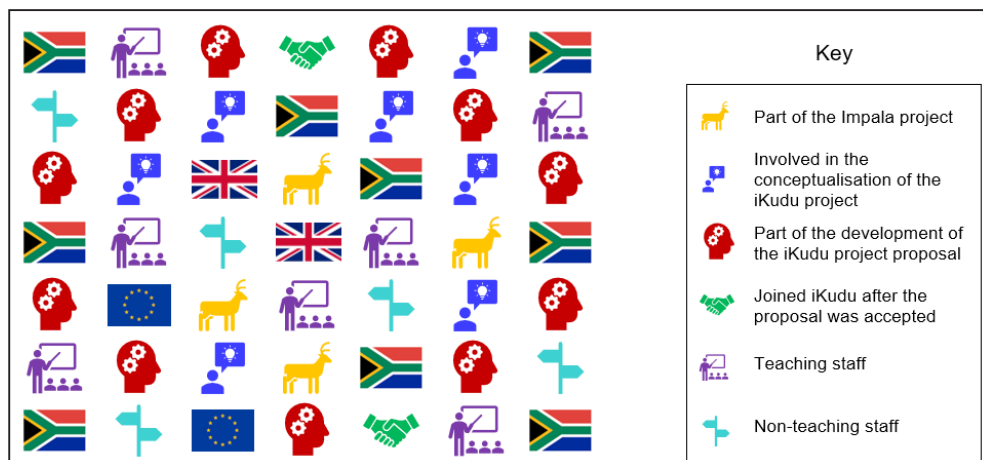
## 2. METHODOLOGY

The approach in this paper was informed by three lenses. Firstly, we based this study on principles of Appreciative Inquiry<sup>3</sup> (AI) (Cooperrider & Whitney, 2005; Elliott *et al.*, 2020), focusing on opportunities, appreciating strengths within the project, its consortium partners and their diverse contexts, and inventing the better self through dreaming and enacting the dream even when faced with adversity. Secondly, we identify ourselves in terms of diversity (e.g. unique individuals and contributors, colourful, distinctive) as opposed to binaries (e.g. north vs. south, African vs. European, research institution vs. universities of technology), and while in discussions colleagues have suggested the metaphors of quilts, collages or tapestries, in this paper we use a mosaic as our collective identity. Indeed, choosing a mosaic as a metaphor has significance in that different textures, colours and materials jointly provide an image that can be seen and appreciated, and a structure that holds, or as Hoppe (2018: 251) coins it “rugs of stone”. Mosaic can at the same time provide identity and a sense of place (Shavit, 2018) and the reflections of partners in this paper, provided in different colours in the text, create the colourful pathways of stone on which networks for future funded projects can walk. Thirdly, we took an insider-researcher stance and acknowledge our subjectivities in what we share. McNess *et al.* (2015) acknowledge that the lines between insider and outsider in studies increasingly becomes blurred, particularly in cross-cultural studies. We thus focus first on the meaning that was made “in relation to the self” and then the meaning that was “made collectively” (McNess *et al.*, 2015: 308) and through providing a thick description allowing the readers to become the “outsiders” and to decide the level of transferability to their contexts (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016). This resonates with what Zbróg (2016) calls collective biography writing where memories are used as data.

Firstly, an open invitation was sent to all members of the two WGs to invite them to participate. Positive responses were received from 14 others, making up a total of 15 co-creators of the paper. Two offered to provide a project narrative, while the other 13 engaged in data creation in response to specific open questions digitally posed by the first author using secure digital software (EvaSys). A link was sent to these author-participants for five consecutive days, drawing from the five pointers in AI (Jacobs, 2015), allowing participants to reflect on specific periods of the project thus far. Collective demographic data are summarised in Figure 1 below, not to provide distinct features of individuals, but to rather display the diversity within the group who responded to the questions.

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3 AI informed the data generation for this paper to reflect inwardly. In addition, an AI approach is also used by WG1, but with a different focus to write the self-evaluation reports.



**Figure 1:** Mosaic representing characteristics of the survey participants

Participants had to choose a pseudonym to protect their identities, allowing the first author to link responses from the different datasets, but also to follow up on missing data. A second layer of identity protection was provided when, once the datasets were merged, the pseudonyms were replaced with numbers and the data from each participant changed to a unique font colour. Certain themes crystallised as the first author worked through the data several times. Participants' views were directly used to construct the paragraphs using different colours to distinguish between them, but to also to collectively build a mosaic of words. The findings were then shared with the co-authors, who as participants, had to do member checks (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016) and as co-authors, had to provide inputs towards refinement.

### 3. FINDINGS

The project started off on solid footing at the end of 2019. When very soon after the launch of the project the pandemic threatened to bring everything to a standstill, it was able to adapt and use the opportunity to find new ways of doing. As **#P2** stated: *we were building the bridge as we walked on it*. Five themes emerged from the data, namely *Strong conceptualisation and proposal writing*; *Thorough management and administration*; *Validating and encouraging relationships*; *Values and Enabling collective leadership*. To build in some chronology, certain themes are repeated in our collective writing to narrate the situation before and after the period when the pandemic threatened to derail the project.

#### 3.1 Strong conceptualisation and proposal writing

The iKudu project was envisaged as a by-product of the IMPALA project at the partner universities with focus on the challenges encountered in the project as well as looking for other areas not covered in the project (**#P5**). Colleagues formed a think-tank that thought up the project over a breakfast with the coordinator (**#P2**) and it captured the enthusiasm around putting forward a proposal for funding for what later became the iKudu project (**#P12**). From the beginning the core group had clarity on what they wanted to do, and kept the focus. **#P6** reflected that the intention of the project was always very clear and has remained consistent throughout, despite the challenges of Covid-19 and some of the re-imagining of the delivery into a wholly online space.

There was strong conceptualisation of the project and a professional and experienced writing team was used. The team trusted each other, with some having worked together over an extended period (#P1). There were experienced writers at the SAn side who are quite familiar with the context (#P8). #P8 believes that it would not have worked as well if “externals” would have written the application. Working with a core writing team is certainly something [to] copy to another project.

While the team built on their previous experiences, they allowed others to make inputs, consulted experts, yet remained on track. #P13 explained that during the deliberations, colleagues made sure that all were on the same page regarding the intention of the project, with clearly defined objectives. Each member of the team could contribute to the area of their specific experience and expertise, utilised the skills of the coordinators of the past project and also consulted with members of the European Commission and EU project experts (#P6).

The core group furthermore included new partners, some of whom had previous COIL experience. #P6, for instance shared that: This was particularly pleasing for me, as I had prior experience of the practical elements of COIL so it was a great opportunity to pull some of my experiences together. These individuals could relate to how they could contribute (With experience of a couple of different COIL projects and different roles (coordinator, lecturer, researcher) I thought that I could play a role in this project [#P7]). Others were new to the concept of COIL and the core idea of the project, but they came on board (I had to educate myself very fast in order to provide any valuable contribution. With time I became more confident [#P11]). Whether they were in the first or the second category, participants who were not part of the core team appreciated the ways they were included: What was different to the experience I had in other project applications was that so many people were actually involved in the process (#P9) even if not from the very start (in an ideal world I would have loved to be involved from the very beginning, at the same time, in my experience with other Erasmus+ projects it is essential that the coordinator develops the main draft of the project and then involve and includes input from the other partners, which is what happened in iKudu [#P10]). Clear deliverables were set and appreciated. #P2, for instance rejoiced at the idea to bring 5500 learners to interact with each other and understand each other's world is an achievement indeed.

Greater clarity came when representatives of all partner institutions spent time together during the launch of the project (during the kick-off meeting, we were able to see a broader picture of how we are going to implement the project [#P5]) and everybody was excited about 2020.

### 3.2 Thorough management and administration

Participants appreciated the thoroughness of the management and administration of the project, as was acknowledged by a person at the core of the team (I knew that we had an extremely reliable team in the office, which was prerequisite to success [#P1]). Administrative work is done meticulously, and there is a dedicated project manager with excellent interpersonal skills (#P6). The respective working group deliverables, training and research was planned with face-to-face training, meetings and physical site visits. Our Steering Committee (SC) meetings were scheduled for four face to face meetings linked to the training [two in Europe and two in SA]. (#P3).

Management of the project is executed with precision, as #P3, tasked with monitoring and evaluation and reporting, explained at length: I have learnt that to submit a successful proposal

is only the initial task in which you stipulate your vision, mission goals and intentions. [Then you must consider] how you plan to utilise the resources, how you will implement and report on progress, measure impact and build sustainable post project delivery. Once successful, the true tasks must be stipulated. Measurable objectives must be written, with timelines and deliverables – writing a detailed implementation, monitoring and evaluation plan (IME), allocating roles with deliverables for each role and identifying gaps through evaluation and filling those gaps to assure effective implementation. #P3 also emphasised the importance of institutionalising the project: the project must be institutionalised through communities of practice which should include the Executive Management and Deans and the regulatory meeting and written reports should be part of the project. This assures that you build on the history of the project but also identify future internationalisation needs that could be harnessed to write new funding proposals. Impact, impact, impact is critical and student attributes should be foregrounded during application phase. Fortunately, we emphasised that this document [IME] will be centrally managed for reporting purposes to the funders, but each participant can populate their own as a living document.

Precise financial management by an expert was instituted (Financial control, financial management and the ability to find ways to stretch the budget to achieve the most out of what is available [#P2]). The advisors who also monitor the project were involved from the days of IMPALA and were clear on their roles (In this quest my role was to position myself in the centre of the Venn Diagram being part of the decision making process but at the same time being on the outside taking an outsider's view of both the SAn and the European perspective, identifying gaps and nudging the project to tackle challenges before it got out of hand [#P2]).

The project also relied on structures in the institutions (The fact that I already had personal experience in Erasmus+ projects and that the university offices were also already prepared was considered a strength. I did not doubt of the possibility to carry out successfully the project activities from my institution point of view [#P10]); It was quite clear that the Coordinator wanted all Heads of International Offices to be part of the full project to ensure efficient implementation of decisions [#P13]). A definite strength was thus the clear planning of management and administration from the onset.

### 3.3 Enabling collective leadership

As participants were reflecting through all stages of the year, a recurring theme was that of enabling and inspiring collective leadership, within, but also beyond the management structures of the iKudu project. While most participants emphasised the effect thereof once the pandemic was evident, some mentioned it in their reflections at the start of the project. #P12 commented on the experience during the proposal writing as such: The positive features of the process were the commitment and leadership demonstrated by those driving the process of crafting the proposal, as well the role of coordinating the various inputs into a cohesive and cogent submission. Others noted the fact that the leaders were inviting and appreciating (It was great to meet [the coordinator] and for colleagues from our Centre to be able to come together with me to share ideas that felt listened to and appreciated [#P4]). A real attempt was made to connect people who were also not part of the Impala project. I believe this set off the collaboration on solid footing (#P9) even if there was potential for tension (It was wonderful how the Consortium welcomed our participation not least because of the political situation and the concern about how the UK would be considered as a partner on a European grant [#P4]).

### 3.4 The moment in time when COVID-19 disrupted the world

The project was ready for implementation, and then the pandemic HIT us! It was the most traumatic experience of my life (#P3). From January 2020 news about a novel Coronavirus started spreading and by the end of January the first cases were recorded in Italy. What stands out about the initial period was uncertainty (The situation looked unreal initially [#P5]). While some recognised the seriousness of the situation, many, particularly in SA, were still hopeful that it would pass without disrupting our lives, as colleagues shared: Initially, before the SA lockdown, I felt everyone was overreacting about the virus and that it would have no significant impact on our daily lives (#P11); When China announced the news about COVID-19 – I think we all thought that it will be over in three months and everything will return to normal. At that point of the global announcement, I still did not fully comprehend the extent or severity of COVID-19 (#P13); In the beginning everything felt unreal. I remember looking at [a colleague from Italy] during meetings, and it all felt so distant. She was telling us about how things were going in Italy, and I remember feeling very sorry for her and other colleagues, but not thinking for a moment that it will indeed come to SA (#P9). The first three months of the project in large looked very much like it had been planned at the kick-off meeting in 2019. Although the pandemic was spreading through Europe, up to the beginning of March it looked like we may well escape the full brunt of the pandemic. We at this stage still looked forward to the face-to-face training that was to occur in SA. We worked full steam ahead around this training event and until the first week of March still hoped it would occur (#P12). Indeed, we were still thinking that possibly the site visits will continue at a later stage in the year. Even when we thought the Europeans might not be able to visit, we considered travelling to [one partner] in a bus, so that the SAns could at least be together (#P9).

Then the reality started to dawn on the SAn side. (The latter part of the first quarter: the global conversations and the effect of COVID-19 on many of our EU partners started to tell different stories. I must admit that I got worried as I was supposed to participate in an international conference abroad but heard the news that it was postponed until further notice (#P13); The period between the point from when the first positive case was announced, and the day that the strict lockdown was announced, was relatively short on our side (#P9); During a lecture of mine the students suddenly started fidgeting and becoming rowdy, on inspection, I found the university just sent a communication that the campus is officially closed and students had to get off campus in the days following. I remember that day distinctly as I only then realised this might not be some distant issue (#P11).

During those crucial days in March 2020, participants had to deal with uncertainty, emotions, but also practical realities. It was quite clear from the beginning that it would not be a short one. the feeling was a mix of anxiety, shock, as if it was all happening to someone else, somewhere else (#P10). There was shock, confusion, not knowing what to do at that moment (#P13). All over the world we were seeing the devastating impact of this invisible killer. In England for instance, the universities closed, non-essential shops closed, the NHS went on red alert, travel abroad and non-essential local travel was prohibited – lockdown began and has continued in some shape or form ever since (#P4). Partners had to adjust to a fast changing situation, and most colleagues had to immediately manage moving to online and managing the so-called new normal of working from home and having their children at home, as #P7 shares: The focus was on first of all providing education online and for me taking care of my kids each morning and in the afternoon focusing on work. #P11 similarly shared: We were facing the spread of COVID-19, we knew things were getting more complicated every



day. Not only we were all afraid of catching the virus, but very much concerned on how to guarantee teaching and supervising for our students in distant learning mode.

People had to quickly adjust to a new way of teaching and meeting, had to learn new terminology and new software. #P3, for instance shared: I had to learn new techniques, technology, words and ways of doing, by hitting the ground running! All physical activity stopped! It was not without challenges and the pressure of being available online and managing one's life at home were real. (We had to learn to use new platforms in matters of days, we had to be available every day at all possible hours [#P11]). It also came with technical challenges (We had to face internet connection problems (seldom experienced before) due to the overuse of the system [#P11]).

Participants were worried about the impact on the project, and as #P2 explains the project almost came to a standstill. It is during the first year of a three-year project, during physical meetings that the aims, strategies and activities to achieve them must [be] discussed, debated and responsibilities delegated, and that could not happen. Plans had to be cancelled (we were planning our trips to SA for the workgroup 1 session and the tickets for the training for lecturers had just been bought. Then COVID-19 hit us and hit us hard. We did go through a lockdown which made it hard to actually progress with iKudu (#P7) and people were worried about the impact it would have on delivering on promises (as to the project, we were feeling very much at ill ease, knowing that all our plans for trainings and meetings had to be suddenly changed and were afraid that this will affect the quality of networking (#P11); There were announcements of bans on cross-border travels; cancellation of events and gatherings; and observation of social distancing. The project was structured to have several meetings through physical contacts and cross-border travels during workshops, conferences and meetings. The lockdown was a devastating blow to the implementation of the project (#P5). it was hugely disappointing that we were not going to meet in person for training, meetings and networking (#P12).

COVID-19 has affected everyone, in all stages of life, with no exception. Although its consequences have hit the most vulnerable in our communities the hardest. The COVID-19 crisis "has exposed the many inadequacies and inequities in our education systems from access to the broadband and computers needed for online education, and the supportive environments needed to focus on learning, up to the misalignment between resources and needs" (Schleicher, 2020: 4).

As the pandemic hit, the importance of the project became stronger. While there was a lot of general confusion over what COVID-19 might mean to our work (and life in general), in a way, the changes made in light of the pandemic really brought everything together with renewed clarity (#P6). This is a period when the relevance of this project is more profound than ever before (#P5), and strong enabling collective leadership carried the project.

### 3.5 Enabling collective leadership

As evident as leadership was at the start, when the pandemic hit it required a special kind of collective leadership. Initially a difficult situation had to be negotiated as different individuals grappled to make sense of what was happening. #P1 shared how the plans we had made gradually fell apart and required managing the differences of opinion on the impact of the pandemic on our project. It is at times like these that the leader (coordinator in this case) needed to be supported to think through what is happening as it was like a plane that took off the ground but was suddenly hit with an unpredictable environment that had to be

weathered. #P13 articulated what many felt: I felt confused, shocked but knew that within this pandemic we must create hope within a country with so many inequalities. It was a relief when consensus emerged towards the end of March [2020] that travel was no longer an option and we had to move fully online (#P1). Initially, it looked like we needed to postpone some of the physical movements for some time, but it quickly became clear that we would have to run a big chunk of the project work entirely online (#P8). Despite being thrown off-balance by the pandemic, participants showed resilience and stepped up. All trainings, meetings, management, research, communication, implementation, evaluation and monitoring became an activity from the environment of your room at home (#P3). Once everyone understood the situation through constant deliberations and dialogues, it was accepted by all and suddenly became easy to work together again (#P5).

Within all the chaos, an identity was forged of a strong network that will move forward. It was the worst of times and the best of times, because we survived it (#P3). What remained central during these early months of the pandemic was the ways in which the partners remained committed to strengthen and develop working relationships, and with care and compassion for one another (#P4). The most important lesson to take away from such a time is the need to keep the ball up in the air and keep moving...it will evolve and travel through paths that were not planned (#P2). Reflecting on the situation, #P1 considers in hindsight that the best plan was the flexibility we had built into the planning. In my view, that was a period when it was most beneficial not to have a plan, since the radical change of circumstances destroyed all planning. What saw us through in this critical stage, during which emotions ran high at times, was our value-foundation and the trust between core stakeholders. A group of people rallied around the coordinator and kept the project ticking, although with trepidation as no one could predict how the situation would unfold (#P2). The project became a nice, living example of north-south projects and has really bought to life the importance of intercultural exchange and just seeing each other as real-life human beings who all share the same aspirations and issues. It's all very well having subject knowledge and being familiar with training, but the iKudu project has really brought everything [regarding COIL] to life in a meaningful way. Although moving to online is a change to established norms (#P6), the advantages of collaborating online and learning and doing virtually together became evident.

### 3.6 Thorough management and administration adapted

As the pandemic then hit and threatened to disrupt our focus certainly had to adapt in ways that enabled what project activities could continue to progress (#P4). We established Management teams for each level and forms of task we had to complete, supported by written templates and guidelines for reporting and role allocation (#P8) by developing a SC, Advisory Committee, Local Management Teams, Working Groups and Coordination and Liaison Officers (#P3). The project SC (#P5) (where all university representatives came together to ratify major decisions and for each of the Working Groups to present progress [#P4]) was quick to amend the process including meetings and workshop to virtual platform (#P5). The Advisory Committee is made up of a core team that serves as a think-tank and support group for the coordinator. The Budget Team adjusts the budget as resources had to be re-allocated since the modus operandi of the project was changing to a virtual set up with no physical meetings (#P2). In addition, #P3 shared that great planning, resources, management documents and a great IME plan helped us to remain on course.

What gave iKudu life during this period was its people and the focus to make this work but also with well discussed and recorded written plans and inclusive Management #P8. Setting up of the WG1 and WG2 task teams with competent leaders to guide the team through was an important step (#P2). The setting up of the Local Project Teams at each SAn university, with the International Office Director as Coordinator and the WG1 and 2 local coordinators as members brought about greater accountability for outcomes (#P2). All of this managed extremely effectively by a central SAn team of 3 individuals (#P3) and multiple platforms that were opened up to keep the dialogue moving along (#P2). A definite strength in the project is the agility of those at the centre to adapt and design as needs arise. #P9 shared appreciation for the strong collective leadership in the project, and how quickly people adapted the plans, and ran with it. Soon, there was buy in and passion for the project from many, and when that is achieved there is usually a better chance to find ways to reach goals (#P2). We developed a collective sense of “we will do this one way or the other” which was inspiring (#P9)

The project demanded more from partners (e.g. I am very dedicated to the project and I put in the hours and effort to make it work [#P11]). The monitors increasingly adapted their role within the new situation. Where previously they would visit institutions, they became observers to online activities and provide wisdom and calm where needed. Reporting structures were adapted to use a negotiated reporting template capturing the activity at each of our 10 institutions (#P3).

In WG 1 we had planned that at the end of May 2020, representatives from the 10 university partners in WG1, would visit the five SAn universities to appreciate existing internationalisation and decolonisation of the curriculum initiatives, policies and practices, to discover the best of what exists. This also had to be reconsidered and rethought through and a protocol was developed for Appreciative Inquiry (#P4).

In WG2 we had planned for the first wave of partnered academics to attend the first iKudu COIL virtual exchange training workshop at Durban University of Technology (#P4). The training event's cancellation meant that what was envisaged to occur over a week and then some follow up training, became training that was spread over the remaining months of the year (#P12).

#P2 reflected that it is important to introspect how one could contribute to a joint project most effectively particularly when working online. Most people need structure to perform well while some work well when provided the space to experiment. The former thinks in a more linear manner and needs clear direction while the latter takes on a more lateral approach. It is for management to identify who works best in what dimension and provide the space to do so. #P6 highlighted that while it is all very well having subject knowledge and being familiar with training, the iKudu project has really brought everything [regarding virtual exchange] to life in a meaningful way.

### 3.7 Validating and encouraging relationships

The theme that came out the strongest was how positive the participants experience the interpersonal relationships in the project. It started on a good footing during the development of the proposal (The process was truly collegial [#P3]) and with the launch of the project at the end of November 2019 (This started out well with a good social gathering and this friendly atmosphere remained throughout [#P7]), even though there were still some uncertainties (The only question I had when I left was, how is this actually going to evolve [#P7]). I was a little

bit more concerned about the idea of working with fully unknown academic partners in the consortium. The kick-off meeting was essential to eliminate these uncertainties for all the colleagues were full of enthusiasm on the project [#P10]).

In mid-March 2020, one of the partners suggested that we meet every Friday afternoon through Zoom for a “Cuppa” tea<sup>4</sup>. It was voluntary and open, and enabled colleagues to chat and get to know each other in a very unique way. It was intended as a means to try and increase contact across the partners and especially for those colleagues not attending Steering Group and Working Group meetings (#P4). #P6 shared that the Friday “cuppa” has been one of the most valuable and integral parts of the project. It has really helped the consortium get to know each other and allows us to deepen cohesion and a sense of belonging to iKudu (#P1). #P8 believes that the Friday Cuppa was just the BEST method to get to know each other and have academic fun! It felt especially important to keep in contact. There is joy and laughter shared, as well as ways in which our collaborative creativity emerges about how we can progress (#P4). #P6 expressed: I never realised this before but becoming interpersonally more familiar with colleagues across the consortium has been really valuable. It is good to mention the high spirit of partners which was very contagious despite the challenges brought about by the pandemic (#P5). The sharing of experiences during such unprecedented times was useful (it was a very important thing to be able to meet during our Friday cuppa to share those feelings with other colleagues who were experiencing the same situation [#P10]; it helped many of us to regain a sense of understanding of the severity of the virus and how our EU and SA colleagues are dealing with the virus [#P13] the latest news about happenings in partner institutions or countries were shared and that is very refreshing and informative [#P5]; I think people have been even more open and honest with each other in the online space, which is really refreshing [#P6]).

Although designed as a social space, a lot of critical and exciting developments have come from this informal space (#P6) and we also sometimes use the Fridays for more structured talks and invite colleagues outside iKudu to share their views (#P8). Our Cuppa sessions allowed us to have a cup together, but also share sincerely our hopefulness, our challenges and weaknesses, the inequalities within our national education systems and what to do to best respond to COVID-19 (#P13). It became a space to incubate ideas, give suggestions and socialise virtually (#P5). It has allowed us all to experience and grow intercultural competences whilst getting to know how to work with all partners in a more solid and fruitful way (#P6). This provides iKudu the opportunity to grow beyond a capacity-development network into a sustainable community of practice (#P1). The regular meetings every Friday gave a sense of continuity in the project while personal relationships played a role in giving continued life to the project (#P12). Through deliberate appreciative virtual engagements, colleagues are validated (e.g. I felt valued and it gave me a sense of importance [#P3]). The fact that we could not have live *tête-à-têtes* made us conscious of the fact that we need to pay extra attention to maintaining relationships (#P8).

In addition to the regular meetings, other ways of communication were used. The blogging documents shared on the website by partners [alternating authors from EU and SA] focusing on current issues and providing possible solutions for some of the issues in a well-articulated format also provide a very good readership (#P5). The WhatsApp groups further connected us, we were able to share even the smallest step forward and allowed us to celebrate each other's efforts (#P9). #P8 appreciates how WhatsApp messages early in the morning to start my day

4 The first “Cuppa” took place on 20 March 2020, a week before the lockdown started in SA.

using images and text were highly appreciated and encouraging and personal consultations were spiritually strengthening. The regular interactions and meetings provided the space for friendships to develop over and above the formal manner in which everyone started off (#P2) or as #P13 put it: there was a sense of belonging to a network of colleagues and friends who engaged and learnt collaboratively in an online international space.

### 3.8 Values

The collaboration in this project started off with specific values already cemented in the project. #P1 reflected on how, at the start of the programme, the cohesion and spirit of Ubuntu in the team made the writing process a memorable experience. Social interaction triggered mindfulness: We have remained mindful that with teaching and learning from across all programmes now delivered in the online space, those universities not already delivering online-only programmes, remains a significant undertaking. It has refocused us again to think carefully about the potential of COIL exchange and how the objectives of the trainings can be suitably tailored (#P4). Although differences are acknowledged, members of the North are clearly acutely aware that there should be no room for the perception that they are trying to educate the South or leading the South, but that it should be an equal project (#P11). Collaboration allowed people to reflect inwards and be thoughtful about how interactions should be. #P8 shared the importance to be sensitive to people's feelings and guide them more sympathetically but also to help others to be more assertive (#P8). #P9 emphasised that one must never assume that what you say will be heard as you meant it. It is better to talk than to write, it is better to talk with video on than without. Although bandwidth is a challenge, we have to try to see each other's smiles, discomfort, etc. to gain better understanding amongst us. #P3 added: I discovered of myself that I should treat people with more sensitivity but always honestly and that the others should be guided to do likewise. It was emphasised that we must make sure that people stay included and on board. We need to reach out to others in spite of hectic schedules. We need to focus on inclusivity (#P7). A stronger feeling of belonging can be brought about when one is provided an opportunity to contribute, to have support from the group and the acknowledgement when a task is completed. It is important that anyone who contributes to iKudu [and future projects] be acknowledged and all success be celebrated (#P2).

Participants noted various values on which the project was built and evolves and these are displayed below.



**Figure 2:** Display of common values

Although the values were listed in response to a particular question posed, they recurrently crystallised in responses to other questions.

To summarise, the themes and subthemes that emerged in this study are summarised in the mosaic below, which serves as a summary of this paper.

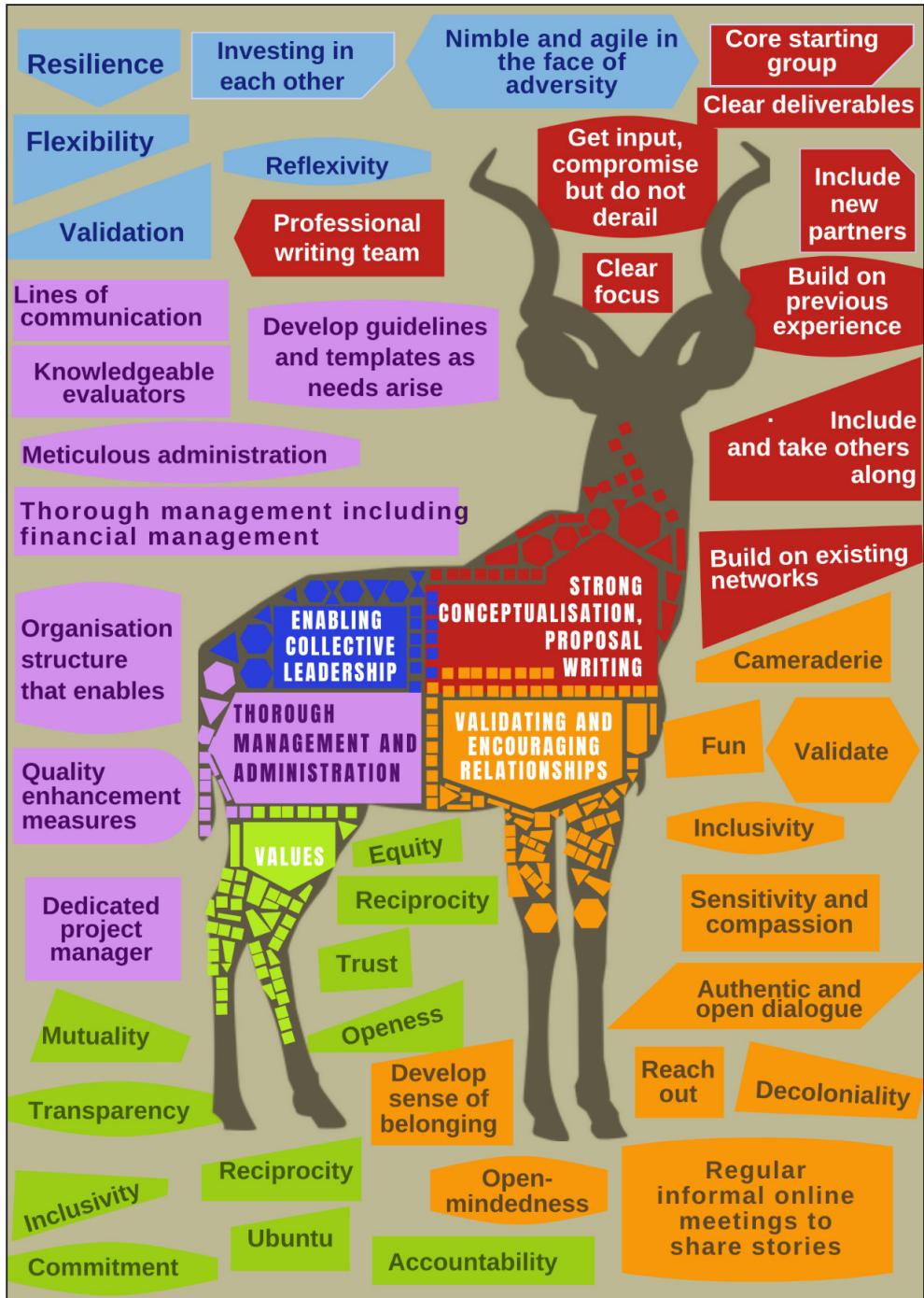


Figure 3: Key elements of the perceptions shared

## 4. DISCUSSION

Since 6 November 2020, Internationalisation of HE is mandatory in SA (Department of Higher Education and Training, 2019) and comes to fruition through enabling networks. Networks, in general, are an increasingly popular and widespread form of university collaboration (de Wit & Stockley, 2011). They exist on a collaboration continuum that ranges from networks on the one end to partnerships at the other end (Koehn & Obamba, 2014). The theoretical underpinnings of university networks are multifaceted and closely related to those of partnerships (Kehm & Teichler, 2007). Similar to HE partnerships, they should be underpinned by the principles of mutuality, trust, respect, informed consent, long-term commitment, equality and reciprocity and should be based on ethical principles and equality (Hagenmeier, 2018).

Capacity building is considered a significant theme for transnational HE partnerships, particularly in Africa and continued attention to the inherent inequality of capacity development is required. The main advantage of a partnership model for capacity development is that “symmetrical higher-education capacity-building undertakings embed ownership and self-determination at their foundation” (Koehn & Obamba, 2014: 113). Major funding is injected through initiatives such as the Erasmus+ Programme of the European Union (European Union, 2020) or the US-SA Higher Education Network<sup>5</sup> in university initiatives that develop capacity in areas such as postgraduate education, internationalisation and HE management. Typically, grants are made available to small networks of universities that often transcend the Global North and the Global South. Often, networks are explicitly established for purposes of a project application and many are not sustained longer than the project lifespan. The iKudu project was built within a strong existing network with a trusted team from the onset and was expanded to invite others. It focused on capacity development for internationalising the home curriculum through COIL. Over the past 12 months, across our universities and education landscapes, we have come together to explore new avenues of scholarship and theoretical understanding, not least in examining what curriculum transformation means, and from whose perspective, and as part of this, what contribution the learning space of COIL exchange can offer methodologically, pedagogically and transculturally. Our work also shares our collaborative research practices that has enabled each of us to benefit and be inspired.

What the pandemic did was to push a capacity development project into the realm of COIL, and iKudu became COIL: As project partners we 1) have come together having carefully considered what each could contribute and what we would benefit from reciprocity. We each signed up to the venture. 2) Regarding what we might view as the “intended internationalised learning outcomes” we clearly brought together our project proposal and within that the project aims and objectives, which are international by nature, whilst also addressing the local, national and global, and all of which were collaboratively negotiated and continue to be so. 3) We are coming together in online spaces to learn together, to be challenged and to challenge one another. We recognise the need for critical cultural awareness, the subtleties and etiquette required in effective intercultural communication, our need to be respectful of our various cultural differences and educational contexts, power dynamics, agency and voice (Wimpenny & Orsini-Jones, 2020). We are working out all these ways to communicate effectively to achieve our project aims. 4) Communication during our exchanges leads to actions that we conduct outside of our synchronous/asynchronous exchanges. In effect we have follow up actions to complete between collaborative online exchanges. We engage in

5 Comprehensive information is available on the networks website at <https://www.ussahighereducationnetwork.org/>



reflective practice for action, in action, and on action, about what is working well, what gaps remain, how we need to be creative and show resilience, we demonstrate our commitment over time. Our time on project is recorded as part of our hours and time sheeted, as we are accountable to the project funders and in claiming on the project budget. 7) The activities we are engaging in could not be achieved by a sole person, or a one-sided team, but need the rich, diversity of our many and combined interdisciplinary experiences and perspectives. 8) We are certainly engaged in prolonged dialogic communication and action. This project is not only an example of a successful North-South capacity development project, but through the impetus that COVID-19 provided, became a COIL exchange amongst the project partners in action.

Furthermore, writing together has enabled us to be more open to explore our worlds and the possibilities of creative research practice and ways of knowing; of seeing learning as interdisciplinary, interdependence, dwelling upon possibility, being attuned, being exposed and creating uncertainty – all of which gives rise to creative thought (Wimpenny *et al.*, 2018). Barnett (2010) discusses the importance of education contributing to the enhancement of “lifewide learning” to engage us as thinking, acting persons. We argue here that COIL has provided us with a fertile space for providing possibilities to re-examine and extend our meanings and perspectives about our educational practices and project work in iKudu, providing space for our different and complementary means of expression, interpretation, reflection and action.

## 5. CONCLUSION

Taking an appreciative insider approach in this manuscript certainly is telling the “good” subjective story. It allowed us to focus on the strengths within, the potential of what can be and how to enact a dream (Jacobs, 2015). There is still much work ahead in terms of critical discussions on decolonisation, transformation and power. Still, in a year that had the potential to bring transnational activities to a standstill, this project was able to continue in a different format with many positive outcomes beyond the original plans. Strong conceptualisation and proposal writing, with flexibility built in, thorough yet agile management and administration, and enabling and resilient collective leadership kept the project going through stormy and uncharted waters. Important for this project is the value-foundation and the trust between the core stakeholders that we consistently fortify and spread to others as we build relationships using the virtual spaces to validate and encourage relationships, spending time and investing in each other.

To rapidly expand opportunities for learning in an internationalised environment, innovation and new ways of doing became essential. Towards increasing providing students with a variety of perspectives and internationalised experience on the road to necessary global competences, COIL experiences is a viable and sustainable option. For COIL to succeed, some form of transnational network needs to exist or be established, and those involved in COIL need to be equipped to do so. COVID-19 showed that such capacity development based on virtual exchange could strengthen capacity in ways that we could not have foreseen.

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