

Partnership Between Universities in Japan and South Africa, edited by T. Maki, T.S. Mashau and C.C. Wolhuter (2024), offers a plausibly documented, multi-perspective exploration of cross-border academic collaboration. Spanning twelve chapters, the volume moves from a foundational literature review (Chapter 1) through a PESTEL-style contextual analysis (Chapter 2) and a South African perspective (Chapter 3), into a series of thematic case studies (Chapters 4–11) and concludes with a reflection on Comparative and International Education as a field and its potential for Japan–South Africa synergy (Chapter 12). The contributors – drawn from both Japanese and South African institutions – bring empirical depth; yet the volume’s descriptive emphasis sometimes undercuts sustained critical engagement.

From the outset, Wolhuter’s survey of international university partnerships (Chapter 1) establishes key rationales – political, economic, academic and cultural – for forging transnational ties. He deftly synthesizes classic taxonomies (Knight, 1996) and more recent debates on soft power and global competition, framing partnerships as instruments of both mutual enrichment and strategic positioning. As a literature synthesis, this chapter excels in mapping a sprawling field, but its reliance on typologies occasionally feels schematic, leaving underexplored the deeper normative tensions – particularly those arising from North–South inequities – that later chapters revisit only tangentially.

Chapter 2, co-authored by Maki and Wolhuter, turns to a systematic evaluation of South Africa and Japan through political, economic, social, technological and legal lenses. By juxtaposing South Africa’s aspirations and systemic challenges – unequal schooling infrastructure, high youth unemployment, weak service delivery – with Japan’s demographic decline, bureaucratic precision and techno-cultural milieu, the authors set the scene for dialogue. The methodical PESTEL approach clarifies contrasting national imperatives, yet its compartmentalization can obscure the lived, intersectional realities of academic stakeholders on both sides. For instance, the chapter notes South Africa’s multilingual, multicultural context and Japan’s monolithic stereotype, but stops short of tracing how these dynamics concretely shape partnership negotiations.

Chapter 3 revisits the South African perspective on existing linkages with Japanese institutions. Drawing on institutional surveys and policy documents, Mashau, Wolhuter and Maki catalog current collaborations – student exchanges, joint research projects, and capacity-building workshops. Their analysis highlights logistical enablers (JICA funding, NRF schemes) and barriers (visa restrictions, funding volatility). While the chapter’s descriptive richness is commendable, its impact would be deepened by engaging explicitly with critical scholarship on power asymmetries in North–South partnerships (e.g., Mlambo & Baxter, 2018), thereby moving beyond checklist-style accounts to more reflexive critique.

The volume’s core – from Chapters 4 through 11 – offers a suite of case studies illustrating diverse modes of engagement. Shimoda’s exploration of Japanese university outreach in Africa (Chapter 4) reveals pedagogical adaptations to resource-constrained environments; Baba and Furukawa’s account of a twenty-year Master’s collaboration among Hiroshima University, JICA and the University of Zambia (Chapter 5) underscores the challenge of sustaining theory-practice integration across cultural divides; and Mpaso’s case study of the African Business Education Initiative (Chapter 6) illuminates private-sector dimensions of academic internships. Further chapters examine webinar-based professional development (Kyaw, Chapter 8), platforms for binational research funding (Sakaguchi, Chapter 9) and Global South researchers’ reflections on collaboration (Edjah & Kwaah, Chapter 11). Collectively, these narratives furnish valuable insights into logistics, curriculum design and stakeholder motivations.

Yet, a pattern emerges: the case studies, while informative, tend toward descriptive reporting rather than critical interrogation. For example, in the Master's programme case (Chapter 5), the chronology of joint degree milestones and supervisory protocols is meticulously chronicled, but attention to cultural misunderstandings, epistemic hierarchies or contested notions of 'relevance' remains anecdotal. Similarly, accounts of webinars (Chapter 8) document participation metrics and feedback surveys but seldom interrogate whose voices dominate discussion or how knowledge legitimacy is negotiated across digital platforms. In this sense, the volume privileges the question "What happened?" over "Why did it unfold so?" or "For whom is this partnership empowering or disempowering?"

The final chapter by Yamada and Wolhuter (Chapter 12) turns to Comparative and International Education itself, diagnosing it as a shared intellectual domain ripe for deeper Japan–South Africa collaboration. They advocate joint research agendas on decolonial curricula, mobility ethics and epistemic justice. This meta-reflection gestures towards the normative horizon that earlier contributions only hinted at. However, given the book's wealth of empirical vignettes, a more forceful synthesis, drawing out cross-case patterns, tensions and theoretical provocations, would have strengthened its critical contribution. A concluding integrative essay that mapped common challenges (e.g., funding asymmetries, bureaucratic inertia), contrasted pedagogical philosophies (Ubuntu vs. Japanese collectivist orientations) and proposed a conceptual framework for equitable partnership might have provided the intellectual glue many readers will seek.

Stylistically, the volume balances readability with academic rigor. Clear subheadings guide the reader through complex institutional landscapes, and case narratives are enlivened by direct quotations from administrators, faculty and students. Nevertheless, editorial consistency fluctuates: some chapters engage deeply with literature and theory, while others rely predominantly on empirical description. Referencing styles vary subtly, some chapters adopt Harvard-style citations, others footnote archival sources. A unified stylistic template would have aided coherence.

In terms of methodology, the editors might have foregrounded comparative analysis more explicitly. Although Chapter 1 outlines a research method for the literature survey, subsequent chapters rarely state their own methodological underpinnings. Were interviews conducted semi-structurally? How were sites chosen? What ethical protocols guided cross-cultural inquiry? Addressing these questions would bolster the volume's scholarly credibility and assist future researchers aiming to replicate or build on these studies.

Perhaps the volume's most significant contribution lies in its timeliness. At a moment when global academic partnerships face headwinds – from geopolitics to pandemic-induced travel restrictions – the detailed portraits here offer practical guidance on sustaining collaboration through online modalities, hybrid curricula and funding diversification. The juxtaposition of Japan's technocratic, resource-rich environment with South Africa's dynamic but resource-scarce context also underscores the potential for reciprocal learning: Japanese institutions can gain insight into resilience, multilingual pedagogy and decolonial critique, while South African partners can draw on Japan's administrative precision and research infrastructure.

For practitioners and policymakers, the book provides a menu of tried-and-tested models—double degrees, research platforms, internship schemes – and frank discussion of pitfalls, from bureaucratic red tape to cultural misalignments. Its emphasis on "win-win" outcomes (Etling

& McGirr, 2016) and principles of equity in partnership contracts (Clark & Wilson, 2017) are timely reminders that careful design and ongoing renegotiation are essential.

In conclusion, “Partnership Between Universities in Japan and South Africa” is an indispensable resource for anyone invested in Japan–Africa academic ties. Its encyclopedic coverage and rich case materials compensate for uneven theoretical engagement. Future editions might profitably incorporate a capstone synthesis chapter, deepen methodological transparency and sharpen critical interrogation of power dynamics. Nevertheless, as a first-of-its-kind edited volume, it lays a solid foundation for scholars, administrators and students to envision more equitable, sustainable and transformative international partnerships.

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