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Reconceptualising International Flows of Aid to and through Higher Education

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Abstract

After decades of attention to basic education as a fundamental right and instrument of economic growth, higher education (HE) has resurfaced as a key pillar for attaining the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) and tackling global challenges. The scope of international support to HE in low- and middle-income countries – including grants, loans, scholarships and other forms of cooperation or 'aid' – however, is not well documented in its entirety, with the prevailing source of data, the OECD Creditor Reporting System (CRS) capturing only a narrow subset of these flows, primarily those reported by donors as official development assistance (ODA) commitments. This paper is a conceptual and empirical analysis aimed at exploring some of these critical

gaps in the known HE aid landscape. In identifying what is documented in the CRS and what is not, it moves from the narrow frame of what can be known about HE aid using this source, to broadening and reconceptualising HE aid to include flows which are not necessarily reported as support to HE but have externalised effects on HE teaching and research capacities. Examples of these flows, referred to here as 'aid through HE', are briefly explored to unsettle what constitutes aid to HE and raise critical questions around how donors count their commitments and which forms of HE aid actually impact HE systems in the Global South.

Keywords: International aid, Development cooperation, Financial flows, Higher education, Low- and middle-income countries, Sustainable development goals.

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Introduction

Two notable features of the current global development compact are the emphasis on partnerships and the role of higher education (HE). In relation to the former, the last of the Sustainable Development Goals (SDG 17), aims to “Strengthen the means of implementation and revitalize the global partnership for sustainable development”. While this goal includes a range of different kinds of interaction, including trade and investment, official development assistance (ODA) or international aid is a significant component. While HE as a goal in itself only receives a minor mention as part of SDG4, it is recognised in Agenda 2030, and accompanying commentaries, as a vital vehicle for achieving the full set of goals (McCowan, 2019). In the context of significant global disparities in the development of HE, it would therefore seem natural for the intersection of these two areas – cooperation in HE – to receive significant attention.

Nevertheless, understanding of these dynamics at global, national and local levels is weak. Not only is it the case that the impacts of HE aid and cooperation on HE systems are poorly understood, but even information on the basic inputs (partnerships, projects and flows of resources) can be hard to come by. Policymakers and international agencies themselves have rarely been able to draw on a broader understanding of trends, beyond their own institutional data.

There is a small body of literature on international aid to HE, characterised mostly by analyses of specific programmes (e.g. Datta, 2018; Jaumont, 2016; Koehn, 2014), critical commentaries on the roles of international organisations (e.g. Collins & Rhoads, 2010; Maldonado-Maldonado & Cantwell, 2009; Molla, 2014), along with some evaluations of aid effectiveness and impact (e.g. Asiedu & Nandwa, 2007; Creed, Perraton & Waage, 2012; Hassan, 2020; Michaelowa & Weber, 2008). Some analyses have assessed the available data on HE aid flows and its implications for the development of the sector. Childs (2015), drawing on data from the OECD Creditor Reporting System (CRS), showed that despite the increasing recognition of the role of HE in development (following the World Bank’s reappraisal of its earlier emphasis on basic education), aid levels to HE were relatively low compared to other sectors, comprising 2.7% of all international aid between 2002 and 2013. This contrasts with

the 4.9% of aid during that same period going to non-HE education and 5.6% to the health sector¹.

International support for higher education takes a number of different forms. Funding (whether in the form of grants or loans) can support infrastructure development, research collaboration, development of new taught courses, institutional partnerships, centres of excellence or mobility. However, by far the largest part of the aid portfolio (and the most studied in the literature, e.g. Campbell & Mawer, 2019; Campbell & Neff, 2020; Dassin, Marsh & Mawer, 2018; Heleta & Bagus, 2021; Mawdsley et al., 2018; Wilson, 2015) is dedicated to scholarships. UNESCO's (2020) analysis in the Global Education Monitoring Report identified that half of post-secondary aid (USD \$3.1 billion of \$6.1 billion) in 2018 went to scholarships and imputed student costs. The report argued that the scholarship schemes in question largely fail to target the students with greatest need, to track outcomes or to promote local universities through long-term partnership programming. Issues have also been identified with non-scholarship aid – the proportion that goes to supporting institutions and systems in low- and middle-income countries. Varghese (2010) and USAID (2014) both argue that HE aid is spread too thinly, targeting faculties, departments, and programmes rather than institutions and sectors, and is also concentrated in countries with well-developed HE systems rather than those with the most precarious infrastructure.

The most comprehensive recent attempt to understand flows of aid to higher education was provided by the International Institute for Higher Education in Latin America and the Caribbean (UNESCO IESALC, 2022) . Their detailed analysis of the CRS data, focusing primarily on the flows for 2019, again highlighted the high proportion allocated to scholarships, comprising 71% of the whole, and channelled largely to donor country systems. The report also identified a skew towards the wealthier countries in the Global South, with only 10% going to low-income countries, compared with 41% to lower middle-income and 37% to upper middle-income ones. In addition, it was found that a mere 3% of flows to tertiary education go to technical and vocational education and training (TVET). The report called for a realignment of HE aid priorities to focus on the domestic HE needs of lower-income countries.

¹ Our calculations, using OECD CRS data and the same parameters used by Childs (2015)

This study builds on these previous analyses, and broadly supports the normative positions taken there that aid to HE historically has not always flowed to the areas of greatest need or greatest benefit to the recipient countries. However, it aims to extend these earlier studies through a closer interrogation of the sources of data available, assessing their adequacy as a basis for decision-making in policy and practice. In doing so, it identifies both important omissions and unwarranted inclusions in the official version of what counts as HE 'aid'.

This paper uses the term 'aid', while being aware of its highly problematic nature. The term is mired in historical, political and linguistic discourses which reinforce asymmetrical relations between aid 'donors' and 'recipients' (despite concerted efforts by donor actors to adopt language of 'partners' and partnership or cooperation). We also recognise that much of the finance which constitutes 'aid' budgets is self-serving for donors (e.g. soft power), does not correspond to recipients' needs or interests, and often does not even leave the donor country (as is the case with international scholarship funding, consultancy and programme evaluation). Nevertheless, there are few plausible alternatives to the term for the purposes of this analysis. As explored further in the subsequent section, a more neutral phrase such as 'financial flows' would cast too wide a net, potentially including remittances, fee payments and private investment which, while of interest in themselves, are distinct from the focus of this analysis. On the other hand, a term such as 'official development assistance' is too narrow, as it would not include grants from philanthropic foundations, for example. In this paper we use 'aid' to refer to support provided by higher-income countries (and their non-governmental organisations) to lower-income countries for the stated purpose of bringing a positive impact on development. In doing so, we maintain a critical posture on the motivations and impacts of these flows.

This kind of analysis is particularly important in contemporary times on account of the changing configurations of donors and forms of aid. In relation to the shifts over time, some historical factors and turning points are worthy of note. One of these concerns the perceived benefits of education for development, and the relative benefits of different levels of education. While the rise of human capital theory from the 1960s brought attention to education as a factor in economic growth, and increasing presence in the discourse and lending of organisations such as the World Bank,

international studies (e.g. Psacharopoulos, 1981) from the 1970s and 1980s appeared to show higher returns to basic education. There followed a period of public disinvestment in HE both within low and middle-income countries, and in multilateral and bilateral organisations (King & McGrath, 2004). This trend was partly reversed from 2000 when further analyses gave greater credit to the returns to HE, and acknowledged its role in the knowledge economy and institutional development (Maldonado-Maldonado & Cantwell, 2009; World Bank, 2000).

Trends in aid to HE have also been influenced by geopolitical shifts and changing political and economic ideologies. The emergence of the BRICS (Brazil, Russia, India, China and South Africa) has led to a degree of multipolarity, with China in particular making a notable move from aid recipient to donor. Strategic interests and perceived risks in Global North countries since the end of the Cold War have also led to shifting patterns of aid generally. Furthermore, the rise of neoliberal ideas and policies from the 1980s has led not only to changes in the focus of international aid and conditions (encouraging for example the introduction of fees and loans in public HE systems), but also the emergence of modalities of aid entirely bypassing states, from private foundation to private company.

Gathering reliable data on this topic is not a straightforward task. There are particular complexities in gauging aid to HE, on account of the diversity of functions of the university as an institution, involving education, basic research, innovation and community engagement, as well as provision of other services such as hospitals, professional training and consultancy. In some cases aid classified as going to HE may only have a tangential connection, and in others, support to universities may be a secondary aim of aid classified as going to other sectors (for example the training of health professionals). Assistance can be provided at various levels of the system (from a regional body to a national ministry, a specific institution or down to the level of an individual student or lecturer), making collation of information highly challenging. Yet this historical juncture makes it even more important that we develop a clear, accurate and nuanced picture of aid flows to HE. Omitting some of these actors, modalities and variables can lead to significant distortions, with potentially major impacts if they form the basis for shifts in policy.

The paper starts by providing an overview of the definitions and classifications of aid and the data sources available. There is then an analysis of five problematic aspects of the existing data: the classification of scholarships as aid, inconsistencies in reporting of aid, donors and flows that are not included in the official data, issues with annualised reporting, and the question of aid through rather than to HE. The paper ends with a discussion of the challenges facing the global community in adequately accounting for and effectively allocating flows of support to HE.

To clarify the scope of this paper, there is no attempt here to assess the societal impact of aid flows to HE, or even their outcomes within the HE system: this would require collection of further data in specific contexts, and is highly challenging on account of the complex causal chain. Furthermore, while fully cognizant of the role of HE and aid to HE in the maintenance or transformation of existing political, economic and cultural relations at the international level, the paper is not able to provide a full analysis of the ramifications for international relations and global justice, although some implications are drawn out in the concluding section. It is hoped that this study will provide an evidence base from which these more specific analyses can be developed.

Methodological overview

Defining what constitutes an international flow of HE 'aid' is methodologically challenging and problematic from both a conceptual and empirical point of view. In the absence of a clear consensus on terminology (e.g. aid, support, flows, etc.) and their specific boundaries around included or excluded flows, we have adopted our own conventions and approach based on the limited existing scholarship and the aims set out in this paper to inclusively capture a broad range of international financial flows to HE in low- and middle-income countries. To this end our use of the term includes but need not be limited to granted aid from bilateral and multilateral government agencies, concessional and non-concessional loans, private development finance from philanthropic foundations and other official and unofficial flows of finance and cooperation, including South-South cooperation. The broader the definition, however, the more difficult it becomes to identify and collect data at the global scale – if and where the data even exist. As this is an exploratory study, we approach the concept of aid flows inclusively to assess not only various traditional and emerging forms of

support, but also to consider other tools and data sources required to fully account for them (explored further below).

Our interest in flows extends beyond ODA, which the OECD's Development Assistance Committee (DAC) defines as "government aid that promotes and specifically targets the economic development and welfare of developing countries" (OECD, 2021, p. 1). ODA captures the lion's share of aid-related transactions, from bilateral government agencies to official sectors in receiving countries or to multilateral institutions (e.g. the World Bank and regional development banks). The term has a long history of contested and inconsistent interpretations and continues to evolve (see OECD, 2021); its most recent definition excludes military aid and donor security-related assistance, certain in-donor country refugee costs, export credits, foreign direct investment and remittances, and non-concessional loans².

The diffuse nature of HE flows is not sufficiently covered by ODA alone, but as it constitutes the primary frame of reference for donor countries, it is perhaps most directly relevant to the function of aid flows that this study captures and is particularly well documented through, for example, OECD statistics. ODA captures the commitment and disbursement of contributions from the 30 DAC countries and a growing list of non-DAC emerging bilateral donors, such as the Arabian Gulf monarchies, East European states, Russia, and Türkiye, among others. In practice, HE ODA encapsulates government-funded international scholarships and training (even where funding goes directly from a government agency to a university in the same donor country), project-based interventions such as university infrastructure, capacity building, or other material support, funding to NGOs and private organisations carrying out HE-related programming, and costs related to technical expertise of donor country personnel. International partnership initiatives designed to support collaborative research or innovation (such as the UK's Strategic Partnerships for Higher Education Innovation and Reform, or SPHEIR, programme) are also included under ODA either as project-based interventions or technical assistance funded by bilateral donor agencies.

² As of 2014, only the subsidised elements of loans are considered as ODA under the designation of 'grant equivalent'.

The notion of an ‘official’ form of aid raises questions for emerging aid actors with either similar yet unrecorded activities or assistance which falls outside of conventional categories of aid. Such unrecorded activity is common among rising non-DAC donors including Russia, India and China, presenting methodological challenges of one kind. Chinese government support is also particularly noted for defying discrete categorisations of granted ‘aid’, subsidised loans, or foreign direct investment, often reflecting elements of each (Asmus, Fuchs & Müller, 2017). The recognition of some flows of aid as ‘official’ and others as ‘South-South cooperation’ is clearly playing to a political discourse around what forms of support are legitimate and authoritative, but these terms also importantly point to ambiguities in what is distinguishable as ‘aid’, and the problems this poses for understanding and comparing aid volumes. To the extent possible we aim to disregard if not deconstruct these distinctions; however, the methodological and empirical challenges they pose – in particular the tools at our disposal – inevitably mean an empirical leaning towards flows politically recognised as ‘official’.

Looking beyond ODA, there are other forms of support for HE development with increasingly prominent roles in the global pool of international aid. As we are concerned with broadening the scope of HE flows beyond ODA, other volumes including flows from non-state actors such as private grants and other official flows (OOFs) such as non-concessional outflows (i.e. unsubsidised loans) come into the picture (see OECD, n.d.). This reflects the growing role of nonstate actors in development finance, particularly to education, including private philanthropic foundations acting independently or in multistakeholder public-private partnerships. In HE, private foundations have a limited history of jointly supporting HE internationally, notably including the Partnership for Higher Education in Africa, a consortium of seven US-based foundations focused on HE capacity-building projects (Jaumont, 2016; Parker & Partnership for Higher Education in Africa, 2010). Foundations that support international HE outside of consortia are also limited, with only a handful exceeding \$3 million per year on average in this subsector (e.g. Carnegie Corporation of New York, Conrad N. Hilton Foundation, Mastercard Foundation, Michael & Susan Dell Foundation, and Open Society Foundations), although some of these constitute some of the largest private donors today.

The flows discussed above (and outlined in **Table 1** below) effectively constitute the broad components of the OECD’s recent contribution to the aid lexicon: Total Official Support for Sustainable Development (TOSSD), which “includes resources that promote the sustainable development of developing countries provided through ODA, other official flows, South-South and triangular co-operation, the support to international public goods and private finance mobilised by official development interventions” (OECD, 2021, p. 7). It is important to note, however, that as ambitiously broad and inclusive as this term is, its empirical utility remains low as the data underpinning the various non-ODA flows are widely underreported or absent.

Table 1: Forms of international flows and their role in supporting HE

Category	Flow type	Key HE donor actors
Official Development Assistance (ODA)	ODA grants	Germany, France, Japan, EU Institutions, USA, Austria
	ODA loans (grant equivalent concessions)	World Bank, Japan, African Development Fund, Kuwait, Germany, Asian Development Bank
	Equity investment	Michael & Susan Dell Foundation, Switzerland, France
Private Development Finance	Grants from private and philanthropic foundations	Individual organisations (Mastercard Foundation, Open Society Foundations) or multi-stakeholder partnerships (Partnership for Higher Education in Africa)
Other Official Flows (OOFs)	Unsubsidised loans (granted element below 25%) and other equity instruments including official direct export credits; multilateral development bank securities; subsidies to the private sector to soften credit to developing countries	Not commonly allocated to individual (sub)sectors, but broadly supporting government services and social infrastructure: Korea, UK, Germany, France, USA
Undefined / Unofficial flows & South-South cooperation	Financial packages with grant, loan and capital investment elements	Chinese government agencies, Brazil

Going beyond bilateral government aid and private development finance, international flows of support to HE might also conceivably include foreign direct investments (FDI) from private companies, personal remittances (either for tuition fees or charitable support from wealthy individuals) and officially supported export credits. While in theory FDI could support the expansion of private universities, public-private partnerships and applied research, we have no means of observing the destinations and directionality of FDI, circuitous as they often are, especially at the global scale. This is problematic for tracing and teasing apart large, bundled flows of finance where the boundaries between granted budget support, non-concessional loans, and FDI overlap (e.g. China's investments in Africa). The same applies to personal remittances, which appreciably play a transnational role in supporting individual access to HE through payment of fees and maintenance costs. The extent to which these flows support specifically HE is virtually impossible to disentangle from other purposes, and therefore sharply limits the practical utility of a working definition which includes these flows. Their inclusion is conceptually valuable, however, in thinking beyond narrow official definitions of aid, and should at the very least merit further investigation, especially in light of the increasing role of private investment and nonstate actors in international HE (Robertson & Komljenovic, 2019).

There is a problematic methodological link between our broad conceptualisation of aid flows and their empirical presences and absences in known data sources. The broader and more inclusive the definition of aid, the more analytically challenging it becomes to construct a mapping of the aid landscape with any accuracy or depth of detail, as it requires drawing on multiple, sometimes incompatible sources of data – where they even exist. Our purpose in this paper is not to build on any one definition of aid flows nor to empirically map the full landscape, but instead show how the broad possibilities of what constitutes HE aid affect our knowledge of the aid landscape and indeed how (or even if) it can be measured and known. This paper is therefore intended as a provocation to challenge existing and commonly held understandings of the HE aid landscape by proffering other ways of conceptualising and measuring HE aid. Some of these conceptualisations problematise from within mainstream definitions and sources (e.g. scholarship vs. non-scholarship aid in OECD DAC data, or aid through HE), while others point to flows sitting outside of the scope of OECD purview (e.g. non-reporting emerging donors, South-South cooperation).

As part of this study, we have identified various sources of aid and international finance data (Table 2). These sources, while not exhaustive, pertain to many of the flow types outlined above, with none being singularly comprehensive in their coverage. The platforms offered by the OECD and the Foundation Center are based on data self-reported by donors, offering insight into generally larger donors with capacity and willingness to report their activities. Aid databases from bilateral donors or recipients often report their outbound or inbound aid data for compliance, transparency, and monitoring purposes, although not all actors make their data publicly accessible through these; where they do, each database uses different templates and offers different data. There are also third-party aid research observatories, the largest and most well-known of which is Aiddata.org, which modifies and extends data from comprehensive sources (i.e. OECD) using documentary, investigative methods. In this complex patchwork of data sources, each has distinct rationales for offering data, distinct methodologies for collecting data from aid actors, and distinct types of aid made visible through their methodologies. Each source also has limitations and blind spots of varying sizes, with some sources obviously more narrowly purposed than others. The combined result is a milieu of different types of data not easily made comparable or reconcilable across sources. The implications for building a comprehensive and maximalist accounting of aid flows to HE are that each source, while problematic on its own, is especially problematic in conjunction with one another, and that such an exercise would be beset with limitations, exceptions and necessary assumptions.

Table 2: Sources of data on international aid flows

Source and organisation name	Purpose	Source(s) of data	Donor actor coverage
OECD.Stat Creditor Reporting System (CRS) https://stats.oecd.org/Index.aspx?DataSetCode=CRS1	Provides data on “where aid goes, what purposes it serves and what policies it aims to implement, on a comparable basis for all DAC members. Data are collected on individual projects and programmes. Focus is on financial data but some descriptive information is also made available.” ³	Self-reporting by donors, in conformance with the standardised reporting template provided by the International Aid Transparency Initiative (IATI)	Broad coverage: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Bilateral DAC (all) • Bilateral non-DAC (partial) • Multilateral (all) • private philanthropic foundations (partial)
Aid databases of bilateral donors and recipients (e.g. USAID’s Development Experience Clearinghouse, Nepal’s Aid Management Information System)	Varies by government, but generally provides data and reporting on aid activity from national donor and recipient governments, typically for tracking inputs and outputs in technical assistance and project-type interventions.	Self-reporting by donor or recipient governments	Narrow coverage: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Single bilateral donor or recipient (technical assistance and project-type interventions)
Aiddata.org (Aiddata.org)	Provides data and analysis tools on historic and contemporary aid, overseas investments and soft power activities, notably from “donors and lenders that do not fully participate in global reporting systems” (e.g. China, Venezuela, Russia, Iran, etc.) ⁴ .	Modifies and extends data from first- and third-party sources using documentary, investigative methods. Sources include media reports, official donor/recipient reports, other official reports, NGO/civil society reports, and academic research publications.	Specialised broad coverage: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Single bilateral non-DAC (with targeted focus on non-participating non-DAC donors and lenders)
Foundation Center (Candid) https://maps.foundationcenter.org	Provides data on “where [non-profit and philanthropic foundation] money comes from, where it goes, and why it matters ... through research, collaboration, and training.” ⁵	Combination of donor self-reporting, tax records, and third-party sources: “Candid compiles data from a number of sources, including direct reporting of grants by foundations, IRS information returns (Forms 990 and 990-PF), foundation web sites, and other public sources. In all, Candid’s staff monitors more than 35 diverse information sources to verify the details in our databases.” ⁶	Narrow coverage: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Private philanthropic foundations (extensive)

³ From CRS database abstract: <https://stats.oecd.org/Index.aspx?DataSetCode=CRS1>

⁴ From aiddata.org’s About page: <https://www.aiddata.org/about>

⁵ From parent organisation Candid’s mission and values page: <https://candid.org/about/mission-vision-values>

⁶ From Foundation Center’s FAQ page: <https://maps.foundationcenter.org>

Despite the variety of data sources we have identified, we find in academic and organisational literature on aid flows an overwhelming reliance on the largest single data source, the OECD (CRS). With this source being used as the basis of analysis for so many major report headlines and conclusions, we focus our critique on this source, exploring some of its critical shortcomings and absences which distort a more representative accounting of the global state of aid to HE. The other sources might, with extensive further research, be used to empirically address some of the gaps we identify in the OECD data. Combining data sources for the purpose of mapping aid falls outside the scope of this critique; however, the arguments made here may usefully inform the shape of a future empirical attempt at such.

Key issues with conventional aid definitions and data

With the near absence of current scholarship on international flows to HE, there is value in analysing and reporting on these flows, even where conventional definitions and datasets are used. Global analyses of the OECD CRS data classified explicitly as development assistance to HE (OECD CRS Purpose code 11420) identify key actors in the sector, shifts in trends and allocations over time, and importantly, the function of such flows (e.g. international scholarships and training, core support for partners, project-type interventions, etc.) (UNESCO IESALC, 2022). Within these areas of conventional aid (e.g. ODA, OOFs and private development finance to HE), the CRS is the most comprehensive and is therefore broadly considered to be the most useful tool for identifying volumes and trends. However, a critical analysis of the underlying data reveals important gaps and limitations, which raise serious concerns about the ways such a tool can and should be employed.

Taking the current HE aid landscape and its existing sources of data as its starting point, this section explores and critically engages with the tools themselves, asking what we can know through existing data as well as what we cannot, owing to substantial methodological or empirical gaps in the known sources. The critiques that follow are organised around five key issues. Within these sections, we explore some of the key gaps in the CRS data and illustrate where their use can be misleading or problematic, effectively distorting and obscuring more representative measures of the international HE aid landscape. These critiques, in turn, raise important conceptual

questions around how aid flows are categorised and defined, and what some alternative approaches to measuring them might look like. We then return to these questions and their implications for conceptualising aid flows in the final concluding section.

1. International scholarships: an ambiguous form of 'aid'

The majority of ODA to HE is in the form of international scholarships for individuals to study or train in donor countries. The role and relative value of this form of support has been the subject of criticism as a short-term intervention which arguably creates dependencies, leads to brain drain and fails to address underlying inequities or incapacities in scholarship recipients' national HE systems (Heleta & Bagus, 2021; Mawdsley et al., 2018). Rather, this funding is invested in donor countries' HE systems while still counted and reported as ODA, effectively 'double counting' funding which never leaves the donor country and is ultimately intended as domestic expenditure. While most forms of aid can be considered to serve the geopolitical or economic interests of donors, international scholarships are especially seen, both by national governments and aid analysts, as a diplomatic tool for strategic international leverage and soft power, and have long been used by the superpowers for ideological influence during the Cold War and beyond, as well as by emerging economies and new donors (notably, China, Brazil, the Arabian Gulf countries, etc.) for similar reasons (Campbell & Mawer, 2019; Campbell & Neff, 2020; Mawdsley et al., 2018; Wilson, 2015).

Nevertheless, scholarships, training and student maintenance in donor countries constitute a significant proportion of international aid to HE. On average over the past decade, nearly three-quarters of all international aid to HE funds this form of support; in 2020 this amounted to \$4.15 billion out of the \$5.57 billion overall aid allocated to HE. As a strong majority of the total, this proportion effectively changes the focus of the debate and its conceptual packaging from 'aid to HE' to 'aid to HE access', as scholarship and training-related funding supports the cost and maintenance of teaching and learning, rather than strengthening universities and HE systems' capacities in all aspects of HE – teaching, research, innovation, public service, etc. This is especially true of most scholarship aid, which bears no direct connection with HE in the designated recipient country. These scholarships enhance individual capacities through training and qualification, and while scholarship recipients may

repatriate post-study (a condition of many scholarship programmes), there are no systematic means of tracking them globally, or by extension, measuring their impact on recipients' countries⁷ or SDG targets.

A donor-level view of scholarship aid is instructive here, as the major HE donors vary widely in their scholarship funding (**Table 3**). Out of the 25 largest HE donors by volume over the past decade (2011-2020), six have HE aid portfolios with 95% and above scholarships and imputed student costs; another five donors have 75% or greater. All are European bilateral donors, with the exception of Saudi Arabia and New Zealand. The rationales for each are varied, with many donors involving multiple government agencies to apportion aid-based scholarship programmes depending on their purpose. In the UK, for example, the Chevening Scholarship was managed by the Foreign and Commonwealth Office while the Commonwealth Scholarship was managed by the Department for International Development, although this has since changed with the merging of the two agencies in 2020. Germany similarly splits its scholarships between the Federal Ministry for Economic Cooperation and Development (BMZ) and Foreign Ministry, and likewise with the US between USAID and the Department of State.

⁷ One study commissioned by the UK Government (Mellors-Bourne et al., 2013) offers a qualitative assessment of the impact of its international students, including scholarship recipients, on both the UK and students' countries of origin.

Table 3: Top 25 HE donors by overall volume and proportions, including scholarship and non-scholarship support, 2011-2020 (OECD CRS)

Rank by average annual HE aid	Donor type	Actor	Average HE aid between 2011-2020	Proportion of all HE aid (2011-2020)	Scholarship aid as % of total HE aid from donor	Average annual scholarship aid	Non-Scholarship aid as % of total HE aid from donor	Average annual non-scholarship aid
1	DAC	Germany	\$1,393,582,134	32.2%	90%	\$1,249,405,278	10%	\$144,176,857
2	DAC	France	\$955,050,658	22.1%	96%	\$914,109,282	4%	\$40,941,376
3	DAC	Japan	\$305,556,324	7.1%	66%	\$200,641,397	34%	\$104,914,928
4	Multilateral	EU Institutions	\$226,923,130	5.2%	49%	\$110,662,983	51%	\$116,260,147
5	Multilateral	World Bank	\$193,655,254	4.5%	0%	\$0	100%	\$193,655,254
6	Non-DAC	Türkiye* ⁸	\$170,608,100	1.6%	45%	\$76,905,303	55%	\$93,702,797
7	DAC	United States	\$157,417,259	3.6%	0%	\$0	100%	\$157,417,259
8	Private	MasterCard Foundation*	\$145,170,806	1.7%	47%	\$68,194,801	53%	\$76,976,005
9	DAC	Austria	\$127,939,175	3.0%	97%	\$123,789,008	3%	\$4,150,167
10	DAC	United Kingdom	\$108,856,465	2.5%	68%	\$73,900,772	32%	\$34,955,693
11	Non-DAC	Saudi Arabia*	\$86,726,072	1.2%	98%	\$84,847,770	2%	\$1,878,301
12	DAC	Netherlands	\$83,091,427	1.9%	49%	\$40,386,475	51%	\$42,704,951
13	DAC	Poland*	\$68,326,008	1.3%	99%	\$67,968,827	1%	\$357,181
14	DAC	Korea	\$65,822,746	1.5%	59%	\$38,557,134	41%	\$27,265,611
15	DAC	Belgium	\$54,950,082	1.3%	30%	\$16,471,707	70%	\$38,478,375
16	DAC	Hungary*	\$47,172,469	0.8%	100%	\$46,967,566	0%	\$204,903
17	DAC	New Zealand	\$44,135,142	1.0%	81%	\$35,805,767	19%	\$8,329,375
18	Non-DAC	Romania*	\$36,493,873	0.6%	100%	\$36,485,397	0%	\$8,475
19	Multilateral	African Development Fund*	\$36,085,324	0.8%	0%	\$0	100%	\$36,085,324
20	DAC	Norway	\$26,113,110	0.6%	11%	\$2,906,581	89%	\$23,206,530
21	DAC	Portugal	\$25,936,723	0.6%	86%	\$22,376,652	14%	\$3,560,071
22	DAC	Sweden	\$23,506,428	0.5%	78%	\$18,308,109	22%	\$5,198,319
23	Non-DAC	United Arab Emirates*	\$19,910,498	0.4%	15%	\$2,911,113	85%	\$16,999,384
24	DAC	Canada	\$18,624,752	0.4%	68%	\$12,709,098	32%	\$5,915,654
25	DAC	Italy	\$15,793,763	0.4%	77%	\$12,155,565	23%	\$3,638,197
		TOTAL	\$4,437,447,721		73%	\$3,256,466,586	27%	\$1,180,981,135

⁸ Donors denoted with a * did not have ten full years of contributions reported to the CRS, so their averages have been adjusted according to the reported number of years for each

More revealing, however, is the overall picture if scholarships and imputed student costs are removed from the donor table (**Table 3**Error! Reference source not found., final column). In terms of net sums of HE aid over ten years, the total is a small fraction, owing to the sheer magnitude of scholarship aid from Germany and France in particular (on average, \$1.25 and \$0.91 billion, respectively), which constitute exactly two-thirds of all scholarship aid from these 25 donors. When scholarship aid is removed from the picture, the league table of top HE donors by volume looks rather different, with the World Bank at the top (volume unchanged as no scholarship aid provided; most is concessional loans), followed closely by the US, Germany, EU institutions and Japan, collectively contributing over \$1 billion per year in non-scholarship aid. The forms of non-scholarship aid that these donors contribute to vary, but are often associated with support for recipient country HE systems, including pooled funding, sector budget support, project-type interventions, specific-purpose programmes, core support to NGOs, and other technical assistance (Table 4).

Table 4: Non-Scholarship Aid Types by Proportion (2011-2020) with Key Donors & Activities (OECD CRS)

Aid Type	OECD Definition	Proportion of all HE aid	Key Donors	Example Activities
Project-type interventions	A set of inputs, activities and outputs, agreed with the partner country, to reach specific objectives/outcomes within a defined time frame, with a defined budget and a defined geographical area. Projects can vary significantly in terms of objectives, complexity, amounts involved and duration.	19.2% (\$833.9 million/year)	World Bank, EU Institutions, Japan, USA	Loans for Tertiary Education improvement projects; construction of university infrastructure; centres of excellence / advanced studies
Other technical assistance	Training and research; language training; south-south studies; research studies; collaborative research between donor and recipient universities and organisations; local scholarships; development-oriented social and cultural programmes; This category also covers ad hoc contributions such as conferences, seminars and workshops, exchange visits, publications, etc.	5.4% (\$232.5 million/year)	Germany, Mastercard, USA, France	MasterCard Foundation Scholars Program and African Leadership Program; France's 'Sur-place / third country' scholarships; Germany's contribution to UNHCR Academic Refugee Initiative Albert Einstein (DAFI) scholarship programme
Core support to NGOs, other private bodies, PPPs and research institutes	Funding to local, national, and international NGOs contributing to programmes and activities developed and implemented independently of the donor.	1.2% (\$50.6 million/year)	Belgium, Denmark, New Zealand, Australia, UK	Strengthening academic partnerships and international cooperation; short term training
Contributions to specific purpose program	Additional funding to NGOs, private bodies, PPPs, etc. for establishing and implementing programmes and funds with a specific sectoral, thematic, or geographical focus.	0.2% (\$7.1 million/year)	USA, Sweden, EU Institutions, Jacobs Foundation	Context-specific interventions
Donor country personnel	Experts, consultants, teachers, academics, researchers, volunteers and contributions to public and private bodies for sending experts to developing countries.	0.9% (\$39.7 million/year)	Germany, Korea, France, Türkiye	Expenses for lecturers, university cooperation technical expertise; bilateral scientific relations; travel expenses for scientists; volunteer expenses
Sector budget support	A financial contribution to a recipient government's budget, with dialogue between donors and partner governments focused on sector-specific concerns.	0.1% (\$4.6 million/year)	World Bank, Canada	Loans and grants for recipient country education sector development programmes

This divide between scholarship and non-scholarship aid is not as clear as the data in **Table 3** suggest, however. Firstly, not all scholarship aid is the same. Despite being reported under ‘Scholarships/training in donor country’, some of this aid funds access to HE in recipient countries and third locations, depending on the scheme. Mastercard Foundation is a notable example of this, with its scholarship support going to its flagship initiatives including the Mastercard Foundation Scholars Programme⁹ and Carnegie Mellon University Africa in Rwanda. Germany similarly has a subset of scholarship aid reported under ‘Scholarships/training in donor country’ which supports foreign students at jointly owned German universities overseas (e.g. German University in Cairo, German-Mongolian Institute for Resources and Technology). These scholarships arguably have greater relevance to ‘HE aid’ by supporting individuals while also financing local or jointly owned HE institutions and systems in the Global South. Problematically, both types of scholarships are often reported under the same aid type, making them impossible to parse the exceptions from the majority of scholarships to donor countries.

Inversely, it is clear from the CRS data that not all scholarship items are reported by donors using the ‘Scholarships/training in donor country’ label. This is a technical challenge arising from donor reporting practices, often either by miscategorising or aggregating scholarship and non-scholarship activity into large singular items. In the 2020 CRS non-scholarship HE data, there are evidently 538 entries with ‘scholarship’ in their long description, totalling \$82.3 million, or 5.8% of all non-scholarship aid (across all actors). One item from Norway with project descriptors stating “The programme consists of two parts: Project Cooperation and scholarship programme” confirms the issue at hand, which is donor reporting and CRS recording. Clearly the analytical boundaries are blurred here, limiting what we can deduce from these data. This also explains how the data show major HE donors like USA giving exclusively non-scholarship aid items, when in reality its HE aid portfolio contains a breadth of scholarship and training opportunities both in the US (e.g. The Masters Scholarship Program for Palestinians, Program to Extend Scholarships to Achieve Sustainable Impacts for Indonesians)¹⁰ and outside (e.g. Higher

⁹ <https://mastercardfdn.org/all/scholars/becoming-a-scholar/>

¹⁰ The Fulbright Programme, perhaps the best known US exchange programme, is funded through separate US Congressional appropriations and only reported in the CRS in relation to the Fulbright University of Vietnam programme. It is not generally understood as ODA.

Education Scholarship programme in Lebanon and the Merit and Needs-Based Scholarship Program in Pakistan)¹¹.

Lastly, it should be noted here that international scholarships are the most commonly practised form of HE aid by emerging donors, who often neither see such activity as ‘aid’ nor report it to the OECD (a type of missing data discussed further below). China’s ‘outward-oriented’ HE internationalisation strategy includes elements of technical cooperation and cultural diplomacy, involving its Confucius Institutes, vocational training in partner countries, and funded scholarships at Chinese universities (Wu, 2019). The scholarship programmes reportedly funded over 63,000 international students in China (degree and non-degree programmes) in 2018 (People’s Republic of China Ministry of Education, 2019). These activities, like development assistance from emerging donors generally, are not reported to the OECD for either political or technical reasons (see Lawson, 2013, p. 21). The volume and scope of their HE activities in the aid and cooperation space are therefore difficult to ascertain, adding further complexity and uncertainty to the size and scale of the global scholarship aid picture.

2. Problematic reporting of known flows

Our second critique focuses on aid transactions which are recorded in the CRS as official flows, making their quantities and purposes knowable through the OECD data. As HE flows specifically (Purpose code 11420), these items constitute the aggregate, headline figures on HE aid volumes often cited in educational aid literature¹². While these figures are broadly indicative of overall trends in HE aid, narrowly defined, they are also limited by the data themselves, particularly in how they are defined and reported by donors. This leads to empirical challenges to understanding the precise nature of certain kinds of flows and quantifying specific activities. In this section we look at two interrelated aspects of HE aid reporting which complicate analyses of CRS data

¹¹ USAID does not separately account for its scholarship support within its HE portfolio. It only provides impact figures, such as the number of students and institutions supported in its annual report: *Snapshot of 2020 USAID Activities* (https://www.edu-links.org/sites/default/files/media/file/Advancing-Higher-Education_v4-508.pdf)

¹² Terminology here varies, with some analyses referring to tertiary education (UNESCO IESALC, 2022) or post-secondary education (Global Education Monitoring Report Team, 2018). Those reports include advanced technical and managerial training (11430) and other items captured under the general umbrella of total post-secondary education (114: I.1.d), although most tertiary level aid is classified under higher education (11420), so the overall figures in this study and others are not hugely dissimilar.

and diminish their utility, including inconsistencies in the data and generalised categories which lead to large gaps in the picture. Both of these issues stem from reported, and therefore existing data, meaning that the flows themselves are known, but their exact form is not clear in all cases. This is distinguished from the section that follows this one, which looks at the unknown and unreported flows outside of the CRS picture.

Issues with donor reporting

With the vast amount of data involved in aid datasets, maintaining consistency is a major challenge, and one that presents methodological problems for self-reported data like the OECD CRS. DAC donors report their aid activities using a standardised International Aid Transparency Initiative (IATI) template conforming to the CRS' dataset values; however, there is still scope for considerable variation in each actor's depth of reporting and the scope of responses given to each data item (Lawson, 2013). This introduces problems for aid analysis, particularly comparative analysis between actors with different approaches to reporting. Some donors provide extensive details of each itemised activity using the Project Title and Short and Long Description fields, which offer valuable insight and context, and enable further investigation. Other actors provide sparse descriptions that sharply limit our understanding of specific activities and their purposes. These qualitative differences in reported flows tend to map onto actor categories, with DAC bilateral donors more closely complying with IATI reporting standards than other actor groups, although variation remains within this group as well.

Underneath these practices is a more fundamental difference in reporting approaches: whether to aggregate or itemise individual disbursements. Where donors aggregate their reporting, it becomes impossible to know how much aid is flowing to which recipient countries. Where donors disaggregate their every activity into numerous small disbursements, there is greater transparency but also a lot of noise coming from the high number of micro-disbursements. Some studies see these difference in donor disbursements as an indication of aid fragmentation, pointing to the overwhelming majority of disbursements (94%) each under \$1 million in 2019¹³ (UNESCO IESALC, 2022). There is scope in

¹³ This figure refers to tertiary education aid, a slightly broader classification than higher education, although the distribution of disbursements by size is widely the same for higher education aid.

their argument for evidence of fragmentation, assuming the vast number of small disbursements are scattered across numerous recipients where the large multi-million-dollar disbursements are not. However, their data only account for the number of disbursements and cluster them by size, which in effect is an accounting of the number of items each donor reported rather than their distribution across the recipient landscape. We find that the issue with aid reporting is not the varying amounts going to each country and the number of donors interacting with each recipient (which would suggest fragmentation), but rather the sharp differences in how donor actors report their aid activities.

Table 5 below lists the top 15 donors in 2020 by support to HE (including concessional loans and private development finance), comprising 89.7% of the total volume of support to HE in 2020 across all donor actors reporting their activities to the OECD. Further to each actor's net sums, we count the number of distinct country recipients and the total count of reported disbursements, followed by three averages: disbursements per country, amount per disbursement, and amount per recipient. These figures do not rule out fragmentation, and we would agree with studies arguing that international support for HE is fragmented and skewed towards middle-income countries (Power, Millington & Bengtsson, 2015; Varghese, 2010); however, they also tell a different story.

Across these 15 actors, the median number of recipients is 108 out of the 167 recognised by the OECD, despite the enormous difference in scale of aid volume between donors at the top and bottom of the table. There are clear outliers in this respect, with Mastercard, the World Bank, EU and USA supporting fewer countries. For the most part, however, the other donors mostly extend support to over one hundred recipients each, with a roughly similar average amount of aid per recipient. Where there is high variation in the average number of disbursements these donors reported, such as with Germany, France and Korea notably reporting an average of five or more disbursements per country, the difference is in donor's reporting practices. Clearly aid activities are being bundled in vastly different ways.

Table 5: Reported 2020 HE aid disbursements of top 15 HE donors (OECD CRS)

Donor	2020 sum	Recipients	Disbursements	Average number of disbursements per country ¹⁴	Average per disbursement	Average per recipient country
Germany	\$1,905,282,343	138	1895	13.7	\$1,005,426	\$13,806,394
France	\$1,021,776,320	132	752	5.7	\$1,358,745	\$7,740,730
Mastercard	\$429,193,000	17	69	4.1	\$6,220,188	\$25,246,647
Japan	\$293,547,804	113	491	4.3	\$597,857	\$2,597,768
World Bank	\$262,989,980	36	57	1.6	\$4,613,859	\$7,305,277
EU Institutions	\$184,798,854	33	767	23.2	\$240,937	\$5,599,965
Saudi Arabia	\$168,948,092	100	108	1.1	\$1,564,334	\$1,689,481
Austria	\$134,888,783	109	258	2.4	\$522,825	\$1,237,512
Poland	\$124,925,595	104	272	2.6	\$459,285	\$1,201,208
USA	\$114,368,834	43	188	4.4	\$608,345	\$2,659,740
Hungary	\$102,338,225	111	200	1.8	\$511,691	\$921,966
UK	\$98,809,870	128	176	1.4	\$561,420	\$771,952
Türkiye	\$82,842,759	109	258	2.4	\$321,096	\$760,025
Korea	\$70,509,635	107	834	7.8	\$84,544	\$658,969
Romania	\$58,566,917	72	92	1.3	\$636,597	\$813,429

Inconsistent or incomplete reporting is often ascribed to non-DAC bilateral donors and private foundations, for which reporting in conformance with IATI standards is voluntary and often subject to donor capacity and political will (Lawson, 2013). However, there are evident inconsistencies in reporting among DAC donors with key roles in HE aid, specifically regarding the tendency to aggregate reported aid items. 86% of Japan's 2020 HE aid items, constituting 71% of its HE aid, were entitled and described as 'TC AGGREGATED ACTIVITIES'. Nearly all (97%) of these items were for project-type interventions and other technical assistance to various recipient countries, but in monetary terms were only one-quarter of all of Japan's aggregated aid activity owing to a single scholarship item of \$154.2 million. While the matter of what items are allocated to is addressed in the next sub-section, the example of Japan's aid items described as aggregated gives insight into the sharp variation in reporting even among DAC donors, which necessarily leads to problems and limitations with aid analysis.

¹⁴ Disbursement figures include the various regional and unspecified recipient containers (comprising on average 8 entities; this is understood to affect the average aid per disbursement and per recipient country as large aid volumes are often allocated to regions rather than individual countries. However, the average number of disbursements per country, which is central to the argument of different reporting practices, is not strongly affected by this.

Unspecified flows

A sizeable proportion of HE assistance is distributed through multi-country bilateral vehicles like flagship scholarship programmes and through regional bodies supporting HE, such as the African Union or ASEAN. Both of these approaches complicate reporting, as these flows are bundled together and typically record the vehicle or multilateral institution as the recipient rather than its ultimate country destination. CRS reporting consequently applies the conventions ‘bilateral, unspecified’ or abstracted regional categories to describe these activities. Due to their overall volume and the increasing complexity of aid modalities, the result for HE aid analysis is somewhat of a black hole in the data.

According to our analysis, 10.1% of all recorded flows to HE in 2020 (\$562.7 million out of \$5.57 billion) were ‘bilateral, unspecified’ HE flows. 40 donor actors used this label on at least one occasion, although nearly two-thirds of all unspecified HE flows come from two bilateral donors, Japan and Germany, and one multilateral, EU institutions. While all three are major HE donors in their own right, their share of unspecified aid is not proportionate to their overall contributions; for Japan and the EU, unspecified activity accounts for over half of their HE activities. Germany’s HE support is so much larger that its unspecified activity, while still third overall, comprises only 4% of its overall HE aid. At the same time, no clear correlation appears between donor actors with low levels of unspecified aid and their overall HE aid profile. Unspecified aid, either as a mode of aid activity or a reporting practice, is clearly not evenly distributed across actors.

Looking more closely at the top HE donors with unspecified activities, there is further variation in how and when this convention is used (**Table 6**). Japan and Netherlands apply this label to a very small (4 to 6) number of large items to collectively report their scholarships and separately, their project-related activity (with no further explanation given). The UK’s ‘bilateral, unspecified’ reporting is smaller and similar, although it names the specific multi-country vehicles funded through the aid amounts indicated. The EU Institutions, on the other hand, heavily relies on this label in its reporting (554 items), and yet in the item details provided in the Long Description field, single country recipients are commonly named. It is not clear then why the EU applies this convention at all; doing so,

however, results in nearly \$120 million in HE aid missing a singular indicated recipient¹⁵.

Table 6: Donors with highest 'unspecified bilateral' flows to HE in 2020 (OECD CRS)

Donor	Volume of unspecified bilateral HE aid	Purpose		Observations
		Scholarships	Project-type interventions	
Japan	\$170,501,243	91%	9%	Scholarships come from 'other ministries', lumped into one single \$154 million item. There are six project items, all from JICA, with no further data beyond 'TC AGGREGATED ACTIVITIES' label.
EU Institutions	\$119,702,158	29%	71%	Item descriptors are actually quite specific and most identify the recipient country, so unclear why these are labelled as unspecified.
Germany	\$69,958,095	91%	9%	Detailed item descriptions provided, but individual countries are seldomly identified
Netherlands	\$39,069,080	55%	45%	Only four items, including one large scholarship item and one large project item, described as 'grants Management Program and execution' and 'non-grants mgmt prg'
UK	\$32,606,940	71%	25%	Includes \$23 million to Commonwealth Scholarship Fund, \$8mil to SPHEIR, and \$1.5 million to Prosperity Fund
Total	\$431,837,516			

By being labelled 'unspecified', these items omit the recipient country, a key data point for analysis, which by extension excludes recipient region and income level category. Although not exclusively so, most unspecified items are also highly aggregated (as shown above), which further limits information across all data points, significantly reducing overall information on donors, and specifically, which countries their aid supports. Where this information is partially indicated in the item's details, this qualitative information cannot be picked up in statistical analyses without significant cleaning or alteration of the data.

¹⁵ This could feasibly be extracted from the Project Description field on an item-by-item basis

More broadly, however, what this ‘unspecified’ assignation actually illustrates is an accounting disparity between donor outflows and recipient inflows. Certain donor programmes like competitive merit-based scholarships do not easily correspond with pre-determined recipient countries, but rather with individual beneficiaries from varying countries. Many applications of ‘unspecified, bilateral’ would fit this description, while others make the justification for this label less clear. The point of this technical observation is that the known landscape and its specific bilateral aid pathways are muddled in the application of this convention, which a non-negligible proportion of HE aid uses.

3. An incomplete picture: missing donors and non-conventional flows

In addition to the problematic known flows, there are also the many known unknowns, or flows which are known to exist but are not documented or reported, or where they are reported, are not easily comparable to ODA. This focal area concerns the emerging aid actors and aid modalities in international cooperation, specifically in HE, where internationalisation of HE is often strategically leveraged to achieve public policy and soft power aims. International scholarships and exchanges of students and staff appear to comprise much of these flows, but some non-DAC state actors are increasingly involved in funding HE systems in partner countries. Private development finance from philanthropic foundations is also steadily rising, only some of which is reported to the OECD, and only recently¹⁶. While these practices are commonly swept into broad categories (e.g. South-South cooperation or multi-stakeholder partnerships), corresponding with geographies and assumed rationales, their realities are more complex. For our purposes here we are interested in problematising these known emerging developments in the aid landscape by identifying some of these actors and practices and highlighting what data the CRS excludes on aid to HE.

The DAC club of countries may collectively be the largest donors in proportional terms, but the number of donor countries outside of the DAC framework has surpassed the number within, challenging the aid landscape where the OECD has long held its central role in steering aid policy and monitoring donor outputs.

¹⁶ Lawson (2013) explains the limited reporting of private development finance donors as a matter of (in)capacity, with only major donors undertaking the reporting process at all, let alone to IATI standards.

Where reporting aid in conformance with IATI standards is compulsory for DAC donor countries, some non-DAC actors opt to report their aid activities, although their conformance with IATI standards varies by actor. Türkiye's aid activity is highly visible despite being nominally outside of DAC, as is the activity of some wealthy Arabian Gulf countries. This makes their HE aid more of a known quantity, or at least a sizeable portion of it, as their contributions are itemised with a utilisable level of detail in the CRS.

Other non-DAC actors, however, are far less transparent in their aid reporting, making their HE aid practices difficult to empirically assess. Such countries often have highly visible international cooperation activity (whether understood as 'aid' or something else), including in HE. Russia, China, and India fit this description, despite their starkly divergent economic, political and historical journeys to becoming aid actors. Due to Russia's fractious relationship with the OECD since its accession in 2011 and subsequent suspension, its bilateral ODA is reported in the CRS at a generalised country level only, preventing deeper analysis of its specific projects and sub-sectors, including HE (Asmus et al., 2017). Nevertheless, Russia fields a sizable portfolio of state-funded activities approximating aid to HE, subsidising nearly half (46%) of all foreign full-time students studying in Russia, supporting its transnational campuses in former Soviet countries (Chankseliani, 2020, 2022), and funding HE project-type interventions through its Russia Education Aid for Development (READ) programme¹⁷. China and India are also known HE aid actors, with China especially funding international students for study in China, lending large volumes to national governments for HE enhancement programmes, and facilitating international research fora (e.g. Forum on China-Africa Cooperation, or FOCAC) (see Li, 2017; Robinson & Mills, 2022).

What distinguishes these emerging state actors, along with Brazil, is their simultaneous status as aid donors and recipients, having both in- and out-bound aid flows. The duality of their roles is particularly well illustrated in their HE activity, as recipients of HE aid, commonly for international scholarships to donor countries, and as donors vis-à-vis sponsorship of international students and scholars. On average one-quarter of all foreign aid to China goes to HE specifically. Whereas earlier in the 2010s a non-trivial proportion (10-20%) of

¹⁷ <http://www.readprogram.org/>

its HE aid went to non-scholarship activities such as modernising its inland universities, procuring equipment and training staff, the HE aid to China in more recent years is almost exclusively for international scholarships (>96%). Where it used to be a story of two different types of aid flowing in and out of China (inbound aid for domestic HE capacity building, outbound scholarship aid for cultural diplomacy and soft power), it is now almost entirely a revolving door of funding supporting reciprocal scholarships between DAC donors and China.

What is critically missing from this picture is the outbound aid to HE provided by these emerging donors. Some of these figures are knowable through documentary evidence and research-based datasets from aiddata.org; however, they do not easily disaggregate nor compare across the years owing to the different reporting and investigative methodologies used to produce these figures. Empiricising their HE aid outputs in similar terms to CRS data is important – although beyond our capacity in this study – as it reveals the full scale and scope of HE aid coming out of known but unreported aid spaces. Importantly, it also holds mainstream donor aid in the same critical light as that applied to emerging donors when it comes to scholarship aid specifically, highlighting how their rationales are comparable and used in similar, often instrumental ways (Mawdsley et al., 2018; Wilson, 2015). This is less the case with private, non-state donor actors, but equally important is the need to account for their role in perpetuating this kind of aid over other types (see Campbell, 2021).

An empirical assessment of these unreported flows using comparable data is valuable for understanding the scale of HE aid in terms of volumes coming from emerging and underreporting donors. A more qualitative understanding is, however, equally valuable here for getting under the surface of aid activities homogeneously labelled either in instrumental terms (so-called ‘prestige aid’) or by virtue of geographies (South-South cooperation). Some of these activities and practices hold important lessons for how we define and delimit aid or international support to HE. Taking, for example, Brazil’s activities in international and transnational HE cooperation, the University for International Integration of the Afro-Brazilian Lusophony (UNILAB) in Brazil and the Open University of Brazil’s (UAB) distance education programmes in Lusophone partner countries both call attention to HE internationalisation policies which are

simultaneously comparable to North-South aid (insofar as they have international cooperation functions coming from dedicated national funds) and distinct (in the way they are accounted for in Brazilian government reporting, and therefore in figures representing their outputs of 'aid' or other internal spending with international cooperation ends)(Milani, 2015). These initiatives are similar to China's scholarship aid and FOCAC, having different political accountancy processes leading to somewhat incompatible quantifications of spending on these activities. As with scholarship aid from BRICs noted above, only aggregated approximations are generally possible here, depending on the degree of transparency in government reporting.

In the light of these non-conventional HE flows, the OECD CRS appears to be ill-suited to accommodate anything not in conformance with 'official', and thus traditional, flows originating from the Global North. The growing profile and importance of HE activities understood as South-South cooperation introduce challenges for this tool, as it relies on self-reporting by actors understanding their activities as aid or international cooperation conforming to a conventional definition thereof and common system of accountancy. Within this mainstream paradigm, how then might we understand, let alone empiricise, initiatives in HE in the Global South aimed at regional development or trans-continental solidarity? These flows might be relatively small and fragmented at present, but with the increasing prominence of non-reporting or non-conforming donor actors playing a role in international assistance to HE, the gap between actual aid flows and those we can understand through analysis of CRS data will continue to grow, further distorting our understanding of the landscape.

4. Understanding aid volumes through annualised reporting

Development aid is, for better and worse, reported according to the years of its commitment and disbursement. This mode of reporting creates arbitrary delineations between years based on when aid items were actioned, giving the impression of change in aid relationships between any two actors compared across two or more years. Analyses drawing on annualised aid data tend to accentuate these differences in annual aid volumes; analyses most commonly draw comparison of aid volumes by actors within a single aid year or compare perceived changes in volumes over any two aid years. In both, the reported aid

figures contained in each year are assumed to be self-sufficient and comparable to that of other years.

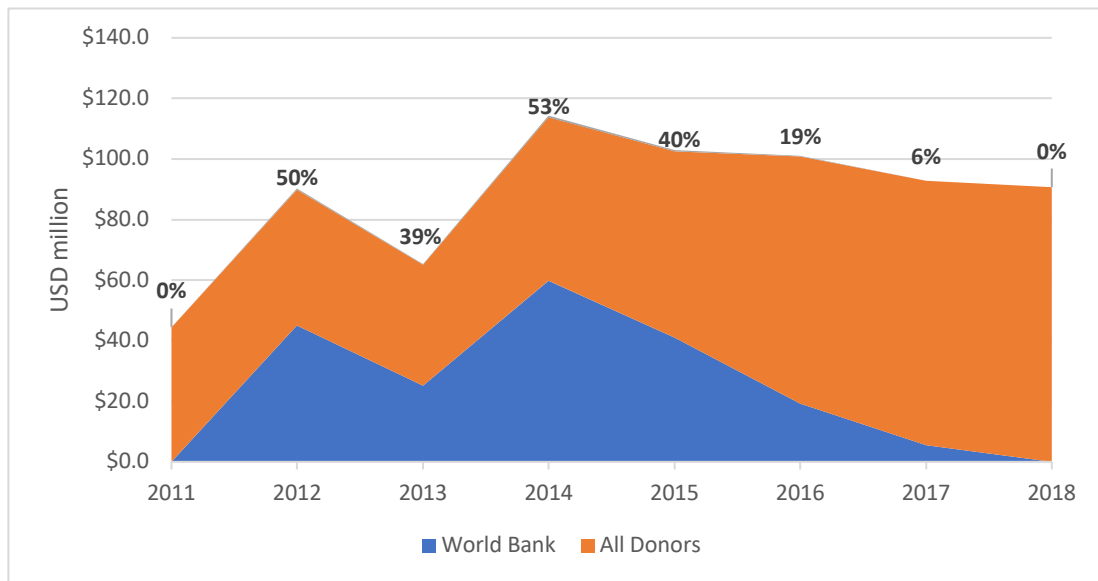
In reality, aid disbursement and reporting are more complicated, and present problems for accurately drawing comparisons between single points in time. Take, for example, the World Bank’s Tertiary Education Support Project in Pakistan, a \$211.5 million loan package to support the improvement of access, quality and relevance in the Pakistani HE sector. Approved in 2011, large sums were disbursed between 2012 and 2017 (**Table 7**). As with project-based aid disbursements generally, the amounts, were unequally distributed across the six years of the programme.

Table 7: World Bank Tertiary Education Support Project (Pakistan) Disbursements by Year (Constant Prices) (OECD CRS):

2011	\$0
2012	\$44,925,835
2013	\$25,209,831
2014	\$59,779,110
2015	\$41,094,756
2016	\$19,170,341
2017	\$5,460,810
2018	\$0

The considerable unevenness of these flows creates a distorted representation of the aid volumes over that period, both from the World Bank and from all donor actors collectively. A snapshot of any one year between 2011 and 2018 would thus paint very different pictures of Pakistan’s HE support. As a large but irregular part of the overall sum of HE support, the World Bank programme made up anywhere between 6 and 53% of the overall HE flows to Pakistan during that period (**Figure A**). The effect, of course, is an obscuring of the wider picture; in particular, the tapering off of World Bank disbursements from 2014 onward conceals the considerable year-on-year growth of overall support to Pakistan from other donors during that time (shown in the figure in orange), so that the aggregate picture in support looks to be in decline when the reality is rather different. This highlights the importance of context and nuance in HE aid reporting, showing the variation within aid types contributing to changing volumes and the high-volume disbursements in specific years mischaracterising the underlying direction in those volumes.

Figure A: World Bank HE support to Pakistan as proportion of all donor support to HE in Pakistan, 2011-2020 (OECD CRS)

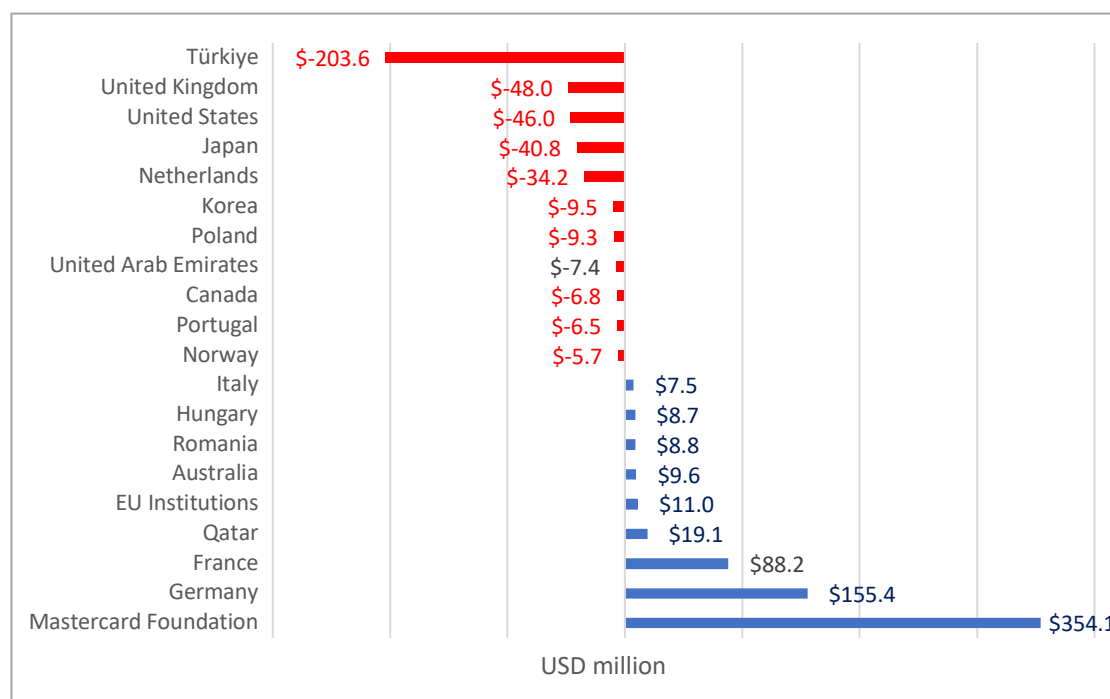


At larger scales, the uneven disbursements from any one actor or aid activity may ultimately be evened out by the unevenness of other aid activities of other donors, so at aggregate levels (donor totals to all recipients, for example), these differences hypothetically balance each other out. At smaller scales, however, the effect of unevenness across bounded years is evidently more discernible and problematic. Individual recipient countries tend to have a limited number of key aid partners and flagship projects, making the difference between several million USD in one aid year and the next appear grossly exaggerated. Nepal, for example, received on average \$27.4 million per year in HE support from 28 donors in the decade between 2011 and 2020; however, 91% of these amounts were from only five key donors – Germany, the World Bank, Japan, Norway and South Korea. With the relatively low overall annual sums heavily weighted by these five donors, it would be methodologically problematic to infer meaningful changes to Nepal’s overall HE aid intake between any two years by analysing year on year comparisons of aid volumes, as these are in reality informed by a relatively small number of aid activities.

Even at the aggregate level selecting any one year to represent a snapshot of overall global support to HE can be problematic. 2020 represented a tumultuous year for international aid commitments owing to the global pandemic, with half of DAC donors cutting ODA outputs and other major donors markedly increasing theirs (Germany, USA, France and Canada in particular)

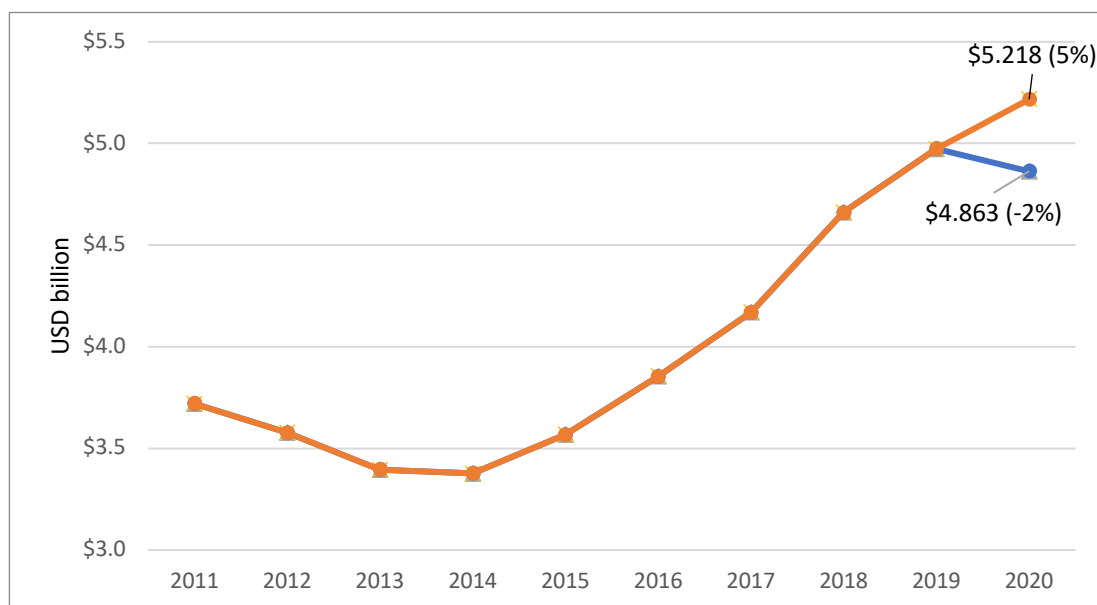
with support for COVID-19 vaccines, equipment and training (Development Initiatives, 2021). According to the 2020 figures, many of the top donor actors in HE significantly reduced their HE support, including USA, UK, Türkiye¹⁸, Netherlands, Japan, Korea, and Norway, on average by one-third of their 2019 totals. Some donors had nevertheless increased their outputs that year: Mastercard Foundation, Germany, France, Qatar and the EU among others (**Figure B**). The balance of change at the global aggregate for 2020 should have pointed in the direction of decline owing to the enormous systematic impact across actors. Rather, it increased by 5%, or \$244 million overall, due to one outlying actor, the Mastercard Foundation, nearly quintupling its HE support over the previous year, thereby tilting the scale toward a positive picture. Rather than reflecting the dampening effect of the pandemic on global HE aid, an aggregate comparison of 2019 and 2020 shows a net gain (**Figure C**).

Figure B: HE Donors with fluctuation in support between 2019 and 2020 exceeding \$5 million (OECD CRS, in millions)



¹⁸ Türkiye's sharp drop in HE support (\$204 million, or 74%) is explained as a result of worsening macroeconomic dynamics and a politicised de-prioritisation of Türkiye's development assistance (Öz, 2022). The counterfactual in **Figure B** would be buoyed by \$200mil if Turkish aid remained constant.

Figure C: Global aid to HE, 2011-2020 (with counterfactual in blue, if Mastercard Foundation had not increased aid in 2020) (OECD CRS)



The underlying empirical issue in the above aid analysis examples is the discrete boundaries of the calendar year, as it divides flow volumes into somewhat arbitrary containers. One reason this is considered arbitrary here is that donors report their aid activities differently depending on their role in the aid space (as explored above). Where one donor might spread reporting of disbursement activities over multiple calendar months and year divides, others report large, singular items which, for technical and project-related aid with less cyclicity (compared to scholarship programmes), could have in principle fallen on the other side of a calendar year and changed the annualised picture. To return to the Mastercard Foundation example, this is significant, as two reported aid items alone from this donor in 2020 made a combined \$229 million, or 4.4% of the global total. Their exact month of disbursement is not indicated, but if either of these items were disbursed shortly before or after the beginning or end of 2020, the global picture, and certainly the donor profile picture, would look very different.

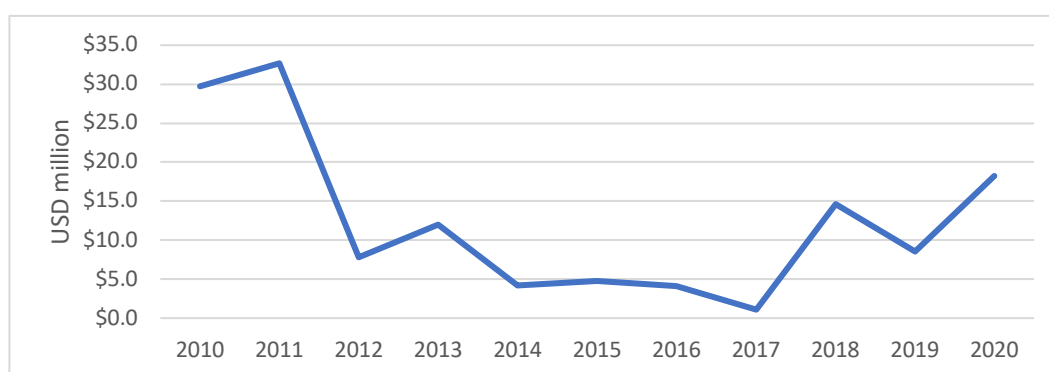
The issues explored above make a reasoned argument for decreasing the emphasis on annualised volumes in aid analyses. Arguably the more important figures are the net sums over time: a single donor actor's net contributions to one or multiple recipients over time, and recipients' net intake from one or more donors over time. This approach keeps the contextual importance of particular

aid relationships within view and puts the emphasis on total amounts over an extended period of time.

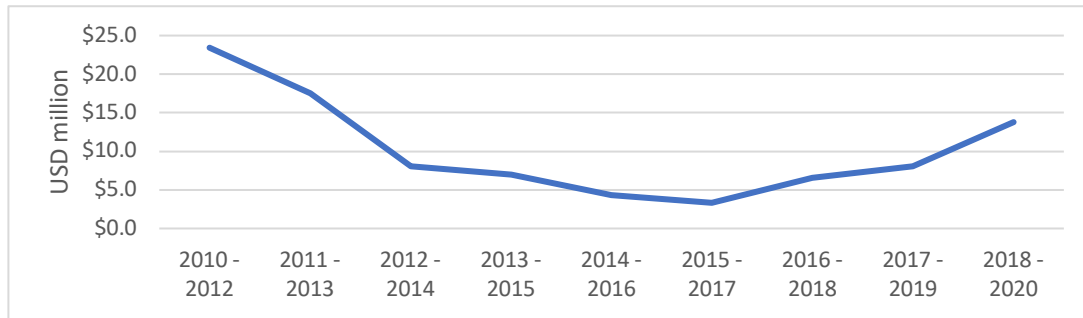
Another strategy to avoid the misrepresentative effect of annualised aid reporting is to approach aid volumes using moving averages to smooth out the ‘noise’ created by anomalous years or uneven disbursements. This could be done using three- or five-year averages (**Figure D**, using Australia to illustrate). Australia is not a major HE aid actor, with only \$108 million over the past ten years, or \$11 million per year on average. Its outputs nonetheless have seen considerable fluctuation, with a precipitous drop of 76% between 2011 and 2012, followed by peaks and troughs and a partial recovery over the decade. That initial drop is important to the context, as without it the narrative would be one of slow growth from 2014. In the figures below, we present the past ten years of Australia’s HE support, first as an annual accounting, followed by three- and five-year averages. While the three- and five-year averages do not provide precise figures for specific years, they do portray a more realistic trendline over the ten years and more accessibly chart the changing direction of Australia’s HE support. This approach to longitudinal aid analysis avoids some of the methodological trappings of singular year aid snapshots, and softens the often double- or even triple-digit rates of change between years in annualised reporting.

Figure D: Australian support to HE, 2010-2020, using annualised, three-year averaging, and five-year averaging (OECD CRS)

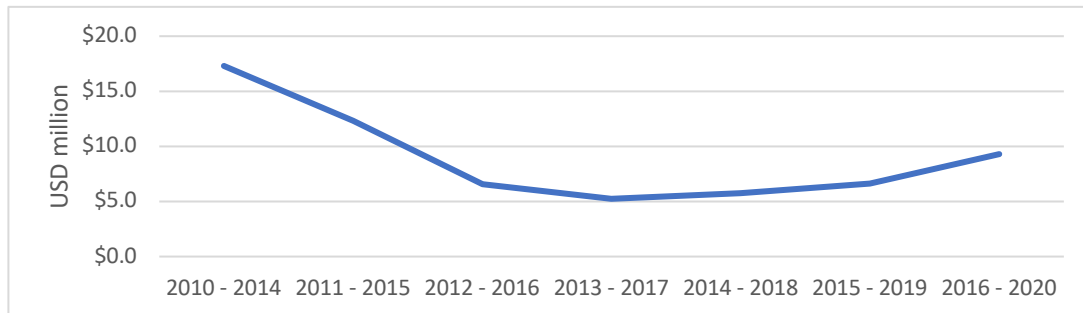
Annualised



Three-year averaging



Five-year averaging



We would not propose a five-year approach where investigating a specific event leading to change in aid policy or a systematic externality like the global pandemic, where we would want to observe a dramatic shift in volume from points in time before and after with more precise figures. But for understanding general changes in flows over time accounting for new and discontinued aid programmes, and the average aid activity of a given actor at any one point in time, averaging appears to provide a more realistic portrayal, especially when drawing comparison with other donor actors or other points in time.

5. Aid through HE

Our final provocation for measuring the true scale of aid to HE is one which could be argued of most if not all aid sectors, but comes with striking examples in HE. In this argument we draw attention to the multi-sector nature of aid interventions, often with primary objectives corresponding to a target sector and a diffusion of secondary effects or impacts across other sectors which go unmeasured in analyses drawing directly on the statistical data. Evaluations of aid to education generally frame interventions in the sector as having long-term individual and social impacts across human development indicators and goals (Heyneman & Lee, 2016; Riddell & Niño-Zarazúa, 2016). HE, and universities

specifically, however, are complex organisations with multiple societal functions that deliver across sectors in the present frame; these include teaching and learning, credentialization, public service and outreach, and importantly, research and innovation (Chankseliani & McCowan, 2021; McCowan, 2019). All of these activities take place within universities, but their effects – on human development indicators, on SDGs, and even gross domestic product – can be observed across all sectors. For interventions involving HE, it therefore becomes a question of whether the objectives sit within or outside of HE, and whether strengthening capacity within HE systems is a primary or secondary objective. We conceptualise this as the difference between ‘aid to HE’ and ‘aid *through* HE’.

It could be argued that aid through HE errantly shifts the analytical gaze from the direct object of an intervention to its distal or indirect *effects* across sectors. To do so is certainly methodologically problematic, as it is potentially double counting by empiricising the impacts of an intervention sitting within a different sector. But this is exactly where the complexity of international aid’s rationales comes into conflict with the reductive processes of recording and reporting, as all interventions in the data either sit within a single purpose category or ‘other multisector’ (which is descriptively accurate but empirically useless as no further information on sectors is reported). Aid item descriptions in the CRS affirm this. For example, is funding for a public health education programme within a university an intervention in HE or in public health? The answer is both, perhaps distinguished by time in a causal sequence. HE is not the exception to this observation, as numerous items categorised under public health interventions involving education demonstrate. This problem is again often complicated by the aggregation of large multifaceted interventions into singular reported items with singular purposes and sector codes¹⁹.

This is less an exercise in blurring the lines between sectors, objective and impacts, although thinking about the relational nature of interventions and the soft infrastructures built on semantic categories (e.g. earmarked funds for specific sectors, targeted programmes, budgets, etc.) is generative for disrupting monolithic fields and their attendant measures (e.g. X dollars

¹⁹ The 2020 UNESCO GEMS Report (2020, p. 329) provides an evocative example of a \$667 million resettlement component of an oil pipeline project in West Asia “for which no clear relationship with education could be identified.”

annually to 'health education'). Rather, our argument retrains the focus on what universities do and deliver as a vehicle of development (McCowan, 2019), asking how aid which passes through HE for other stated purposes simultaneously, although often not explicitly, enhances capacities within the vehicles themselves, including individual and organisational capacities – to research, to teach and train, etc. Shifting the analytical gaze to universities as vehicles for developmental outputs places sustainability, both of aid interventions and their impacts, squarely in the frame. While a normative argument, there are direct implications for our exercise in understanding and measuring international flows of support to HE.

To illustrate, we look at the example of the UK's Global Challenges Research Fund (GCRF), a £1.5 billion GBP (\$2.06 billion²⁰) research and innovation fund "to improve lives and opportunity in the developing world" through interdisciplinary, collaborative research addressing global challenges and the SDGs (UKRI, 2022a). Managed by the UK Department for Business, Energy and Industrial Strategy and delivered through Research Councils UK (now UK Research and Innovation, or UKRI), devolved funding councils, and disciplinary academies, it is a national research funding vehicle designed foremost "to ensure UK science takes the lead in addressing the problems faced by developing countries, whilst developing [the UK's] ability to deliver cutting-edge research" (UK Department for Business Energy & Industrial Strategy, 2017, p. 2). However, with research outputs trained on global health, climate change, conflict and other SDG themes, it is also classified as ODA drawing down from the UK's annual ODA commitments. The conflation of these two public spending objectives reflects the UK's "very clear guiding principle" of meeting "our moral obligation to the world's poorest and also support our national interest" (UK HM Treasury, 2015, p. 9). The limited term fund has supported over 1,300 projects and research centres between 2016 and 2021, ranging from \$16,300 to \$25.8 million (averaging \$1.2 million each).

Several important elements of GCRF funding set it apart from other research funding vehicles. Firstly, at its core is the principle of collaborative partnership, with the expectation that projects are "based upon equitable partnerships with researchers and others in resource-poor settings, which are transparent, of

²⁰ using average 2021 GBP-USD conversion rate

mutual respect and deliver mutual benefits” (UKRI, 2022b). Most, although not all GCRF projects include in their design collaborative partnerships between research organisations in the UK and the Global South, while some funding is exclusively earmarked for universities and centres of excellence in the Global South (e.g. the African Research Universities Alliance). Secondly, while research with SDG applications is the primary objective, it is also attended by the aim to “embed capacity strengthening activities both within the lifecycle of the research project, and where possible, beyond” (*ibid.*). One subset of the fund – £225 million (\$309 million) across 37 projects – was created explicitly “to grow research capacity around the globe and to strengthen and broaden skills and expertise to address specific challenges of developing regions and countries” (Research Councils UK, 2017, p. 2); however, numerous GCRF projects outside of this subset also have a training and capacity element to their design, often in the collaborative partners’ organisations or countries.

Whether or not each project has partners in the Global South or a clear research capacity-enhancing component, what is striking about their relationship to ODA is that each item in the CRS is assigned to a recipient country or region. Our analysis took CRS data on UK ODA across all sectors between 2016-2020, filtering the donor project ID, project title, and long description fields for keywords ‘GCRF’ and ‘Global Challenges Research Fund’. After removing duplicates, 3,315 unique GCRF items were identified²¹, totalling \$1.39 billion²². Of these, only \$3.17 million is assigned to the HE purpose code 11420, as these items – not necessarily discrete GCRF projects – are the rare few which are classified as having a primary (terminal) purpose in HE. These items appear to pertain to only one GCRF programme on Higher Education Partnerships in sub-Saharan Africa, which builds and strengthens industrial and academic partnerships between UK and sub-Saharan African universities in the field of engineering education.

Clearly this is only a small piece of the GCRF, which is distributed across multiple sectors and is far more complex (**Figure E**). Over half (58%) of items are ‘Other Multisector’, which is perhaps accurate from a reporting perspective, but importantly, highlights here the hybridity of these projects’ purposes. While

²¹ Denoting unique, recorded disbursements in the CRS. These are not all unique projects.

²² We assume the remaining amount out of the \$2.06 billion fund will appear in the 2021-2026 CRS data as some projects are not scheduled to conclude until 2026.

the CRS descriptive data are limited, a closer look at a sampling of non-HE items identify various HE activities within their programming (**Table 8**). These examples of projects assigned to various sectors outside of HE appear to draw on the functions of universities or other research organisations by funding research with international collaborators and building research capacity through partnerships, fellowships and networks.

Figure E: GCRF items by sector assignment (aggregated), 2016-2020 (OECD CRS)

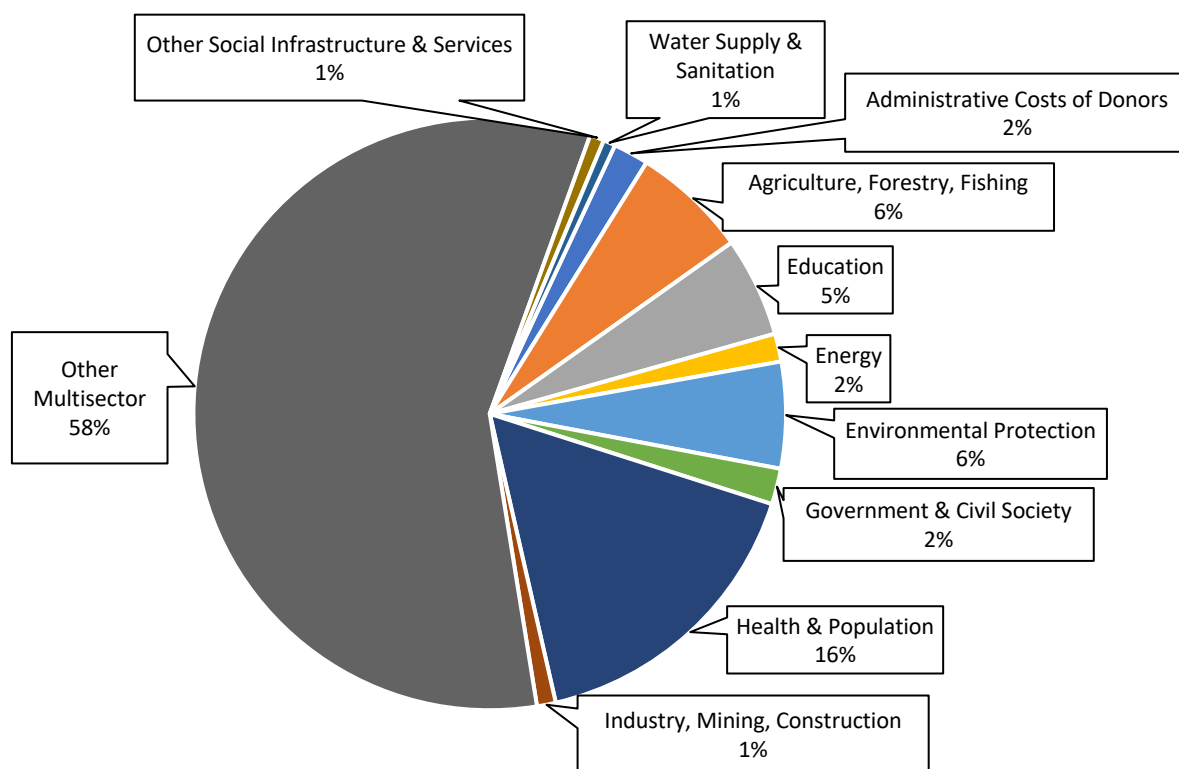


Table 8: Sample of non-HE purposed GCRF items (OECD CRS)

Sector	Recipient Name	Long Description	Value
I.2.a. Health, General	Bilateral, unspecified	GCRF RESEARCH FOR HEALTH IN CONFLICT (R4HCMENA): developing capability, partnerships and research in the Middle and Near East (MENA)	\$ 1,539,383
I.3. Population Policies/Programmes & Reproductive Health	South of Sahara, regional	GCRF: The PRECISE (PREgnancy Care Integrating translational Science, Everywhere) Network: a subSaharan network for placental disorders	\$ 1,974,053
I.4. Water Supply & Sanitation	China (People's Republic of)	Engineering for Development Research Fellowships	\$ 169,718
I.4. Water Supply & Sanitation	China (People's Republic of)	ChinaUK Research for Safeguarding Natural Waters	\$ 101,831
I.5.b. Conflict, Peace & Security	South & Central Asia, regional	Robotics & Remote Sensing for Humanitarian Mine Action & Explosive Remnants of War Survey: Southeast Asia Feasibility Study with Low to Middle Income	\$ 114,428
III.1.a. Agriculture	South of Sahara, regional	GCRF: Strengthening Capacity in Environmental Physics, Hydrology and Statistics for Conservation Agriculture Research.	\$ 1,286,501

Delving deeper into GCRF items, we sampled from a publicly available GCRF project index²³, selecting projects to investigate further based on their differing funding amount, number of international partners, disciplinary focus, and designated lead research organisation. We then conducted web searches for each of the projects, gathering information to assess the degree of involvement of collaborators in the Global South, and whether the project had an explicit aim to enhance partners' organisational and individual capacities through collaboration, training, networking, or other HE functions.

The findings varied widely as expected for a funding vehicle of this complexity, and were limited by the amount of publicly available information for each project. Some were inherently focused on using existing research infrastructures and acumen to address their SDG-related challenges, to the exclusion of any capacity-building elements. These projects, often on the smaller end of the GCRF funding spectrum, drew on varying input from Global Southern partners – or in rare cases were led by organisations in the Global South –while having little to no objectives to build on the partnership, train

²³ https://gtr.ukri.org/resources/classificationprojects.html?id=D640D1B8-B141-4DFC-BCD3-CEADD848A918&type=RCUK_Programme&text=GCRF

researchers or establish infrastructure. Their relationship to HE is not tangential, but neither is it transformative.

Other GCRF projects and centres, however, clearly had more HE transformative elements, with greater investment in Southern universities' capacities to deliver the project. Some common elements were, for example, short trainings in research methods, tools and software, longer training including funded PhD studentships, and postdoctoral fellowships, and early career researcher programmes. Projects also included the establishment of knowledge exchange networks between partner institutions to facilitate horizontal collaborations in and beyond the funded project. Capacity enhancement was not always made explicit as an aim, nor was it concentrated in all cases in HE in the Global South. In other cases, however, it was foregrounded alongside the research objectives as a fundamental component. In one illustrative example, the website of a GCRF-funded project made explicit its capacity enhancing aims:

A core aim of Sentinel is to enhance capacity of UK and African researchers to co-develop with research users (notably policy makers) excellent and relevant interdisciplinary research on the impacts, risks and trade-offs within and between social, economic and environmental dimensions of different agricultural development pathways that relate to SDGs 2, 10 and 15.

Using a participatory process that combines state-of-the-art research with effective research user engagement, Sentinel will enhance the capacity of researchers in the UK, Zambia, Ethiopia, and Ghana to:

- 1. Investigate sustainable development challenges through interdisciplinary research*
- 2. Increase the relevance of their research to key information needs of research users by engaging effectively with them throughout the research process*

3. *Ensure that research findings can be readily applied both during the timeframe of the programme and on an on-going basis.*

Our partnership with RUFORUM, a pan-African consortium of African Universities, will contribute to strengthening capacity of researchers beyond the three target countries to conduct relevant research at the agricultural/environment nexus and to strengthen their teaching in this respect. Capacity development is embedded throughout the programme as an integral part of the research agenda, building on frameworks of research capacity development developed as part of the UK Department for International Development's research strategy. Sentinel recognises that effective organisational systems, processes and relationships are key to ensuring that research is relevant, makes the best use of existing knowledge, and that researchers are well connected, motivated and rewarded. As such, Sentinel is using collaborative research / learning, interactive training and mentoring of junior staff, and direct engagement with senior university managers in the UK and in Africa to overcome capacity constraints.

Based on a capacity needs assessment, Sentinel will also employ tangible activities to strengthen technical and 'process-oriented' capacities for co-developing research and implementing research outputs with researcher users to address the Sentinel aims. These may include knowledge-building workshops, training workshops, seminars, or webcasts.

(Social and Environmental Tradeoffs in African Agriculture, or The Sentinel project, n.d.)

We draw attention to these projects as they not only involve Global Southern HE in its existing form but contribute to its organisations and individual staff to build on capacities to sustain research production and related HE functions. Our borehole exploratory approach limits what our analysis can tell us about the *proportion* of projects with HE capacity-related objectives across the wider

GCRF; to do this would require extensive investigation into each project (assuming these specific data are not collated by UKRI). Nevertheless, it was sufficient to explore the fund and observe some of its recurring elements involving HE. We emphasise that not all projects had HE outcomes, and that these would not be considered aid through HE (lest we take the view that all research funding that goes to Global South universities is aid through HE too). However, GCRF projects with explicit or implicit HE capacity-related objectives clearly illustrate a practice we identify as aid through HE, as it is reported ODA with a primary, stated objective aiding a different sector or SDG, yet satisfying some of the same conditions or outcomes as aid *to* HE does in its passing *through* universities and researchers.

Our point in observing this practice here is to further problematise our knowledge of the HE aid landscape and add further conceptual and technical complexity to what we see as a highly problematic and misleading picture provided by base CRS statistics on aid to HE. Adding aid through HE to this picture opens the landscape up to numerous possibilities beyond the GCRF and stretches the conceptual definition of aid around the complex functions of the university to capture the multi-stranded objectives of an aid interventions which involve HE. This approach introduces steep methodological challenges which may reduce the empirical and conceptual utility of existing aid definitions and data sources; however, we argue that broadening out the conceptualisation of HE aid to include interventions with secondary impacts on HE is necessary, especially in light of the increasing complexity of knowledge-based international aid strategies.

Conclusions

The SDGs are by no means an ideal scheme, being the product of a number of compromises with our flawed political and economic systems so as to ensure the required universal endorsement. Nevertheless, they do point us in the right direction for a more just and sustainable world, and are worth working towards even while setting our sights beyond. If we are to achieve them then we need HE institutions and systems of quality throughout the world, including in low-income countries where once they may have been considered a luxury. If the countries that signed up to the global compact are serious about ensuring that

this happens then a clear programme is needed to ensure the adequate resources of these institutions – many of which are woefully underfunded.

In order to ensure this coordination, a clear picture of existing flows of international support to HE is needed. However, the analysis presented in this paper has shown that the grounds on which our current understanding is based is shaky to say the least. Most of the funding goes towards scholarships for studying in the donor countries and therefore has uncertain impacts on the HE systems of the recipient countries. There is inconsistency in reporting practice, making comparisons between countries difficult. A number of donors – most importantly China – are not included in the CRS data, nor are certain non-conventional flows of aid. Annualised reporting can provide a distorted picture of the changes over time. Finally, much aid that is not classified as going to HE actually passes through and potentially strengthens universities. Some of the above points are specific to HE, while others apply to all areas of aid data.

The overall picture, therefore, is a complex one, with the most authoritative dataset in some respects considerably over-reporting the quantities of HE aid, and in others significantly under-reporting it. At the very least then, significant caution is needed in drawing conclusions from the volume of aid. Aid politics within the DAC community often focuses on ODA commitments as a proportion of GNI, with many donors aspiring to the shared 0.7% target. This too is important, as adherence to this level of output by the DAC countries alone would increase global aid from \$179 billion to \$382.5 billion²⁴. However, there are clearly some aid flows (e.g. scholarships) which have an indirect and arguably negligible effect on low- and middle-income countries' HE systems, while other sources of ODA not considered HE aid (e.g. UK GCRF) have a much closer relationship to HE systems.

As stated in the introduction, this paper is cognizant of the problematic nature of the terminology and practice of 'aid'. In focusing on the question of data, it is not accepting naïvely that all aid is well-intentioned and effective in ensuring global justice – in some cases the opposite is true. Nevertheless, in order to provide either an endorsement or critique of aid, a clear picture of the facts is

²⁴ based on preliminary data on ODA levels in 2021 (OECD, 2022) and authors' calculations

needed, and we are still a long way from a reliable body of evidence. This paper has aimed to clarify the basis on which these normative arguments play out.

Given the complexity of the picture that emerges, are there any definite implications for policy? An immediate point is the importance of avoiding drawing hasty conclusions from the figures. For example, comparisons between primary, secondary and tertiary education show favourable proportions going to the latter, reinforcing ideas that it is a privileged sector, yet the lion's share of this funding is not directly supporting the institutions of low- and middle-income countries (UNESCO IESALC, 2022; Varghese, 2010). At the same time, there are other forms of international assistance and cooperation not reported as HE that pass through, and potentially strengthen universities. At the very least, we need to include these forms in our considerations and planning. Naturally, the clearest implication emerging from this analysis is the need for better data and a stronger evidence-base, providing a more comprehensive and consistent view of aid flows in terms of donors, modalities and recipients. Without this evidence base it will not be possible to develop the deeper analyses needed of the impacts and effectiveness of these flows, and ultimately to inform the debate on what aid, if any, is needed.

A final point is that we need to refine our understanding of universities and their role in development. HE is characterised by having both intrinsic worth – the value in itself of deepening human understanding – but also instrumental worth in fostering the full range of individual and collective goods, economic, political and cultural. These dimensions are reflected in the SDGs which recognise HE as a goal in itself (in SDG 4) as well as the role that it plays in facilitating the other 16 goals. This paper has explored how the reporting of aid to HE has focused primarily on the first of these – the goal of expanding access to universities (and even that imperfectly). The ways that aid flows engage universities in supporting the other goals are rarely acknowledged. Integrating these dual roles in our understandings of international partnerships for development is a vital step on the road towards global sustainability.

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