**The effects of boundary spanning on the development of social capital between faculty members operating transnational higher education partnerships**

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**Abstract:**
This paper explores social capital development between operational faculty members delivering Sino-British transnational partnerships. Research focuses on two Sino-British 'joint programme' partnership case studies in order to investigate boundary-spanning and the development of social capital between UK and Sino academics involved in programme delivery. Since social capital is posited as a central facet in the development and institutionalisation of successful partnerships, understanding how to grow, nurture and maintain productive levels of social capital between operational academics could significantly improve and strengthen transnational partnerships. Findings suggest boundary-spanning is a useful tool, enabling individuals to interpret, transmit and filter knowledge, facilitate in resource transmission and represent their organisations, building cohesion and commitment between stakeholders. The research concludes that boundary-spanning can improve social capital between operation faculty members, and that senior leaders at higher education institutions should consider it as a tool with which to manage and evolve their international educational partnerships.

**Key words:** Transnational education partnerships, social capital, boundary spanning, faculty members, operational teams.

**Introduction**

Over the years, academics have tried to analyse how globalisation is affecting the internationalisation strategies of higher education (HE) (Warwick & Morgan, 2013; Knight, 2013). The values that national systems now promote through educational policy are no longer determined wholly by policy actors within the nation state, but are forged through complex processes that occur in transnational and globally networked spaces (Rizvi & Lingard, 2010). These policy moves have enhanced the space for international co-operation and competition in HE. Universities and colleges are now encouraged to develop world-wide initiatives (Ayoubi & Al-Habaibeh, 2006) in order to meet the challenges of new open information environments. Knight (2008) suggests internationalisation strategies in contemporary HE range in form and content, and can include collaborative research, joint and double degree programmes, mobility programmes for staff and students, student recruitment, expanding partnerships and franchises and offshore campuses. Since these initiatives play an increasingly important part in the landscape of contemporary higher education, understanding how to maintain

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and develop these initiatives is increasingly important to an institutions reputation and competitive position.

This paper reports findings from a case study of two Sino- British (transnational) 'joint programme' partnerships (QAA, 2013). The aim of the study was to investigate the role played by 'boundary spanning' (Williams, 2013) in the growth of social capital between staff members tasked with programme delivery. It sought to explore how operational teams (located in both the UK and China) experience and interpret their working relationships and how boundary spanning influences these relationships.

First, due to the complex nature of transnational education (TNE), terminology is discussed, followed by a definition of the type of TNE partnership cases utilised in this study. TNE partnership literature is then examined, providing a justification for why a study of TNE operational relationships is required and the contribution it can make to existing discourse. Further literature that links business partnerships and social capital are examined, followed by an analysis of boundary spanning and its relationship with social capital. A methodology follows, detailing the two cases, followed by findings and a conclusion.

**TNE as an internationalisation strategy**

To compete globally, many institutions seek to promote their HE services to overseas markets, often by developing transnational education. Although many national definitions of TNE exist (McNamara & Knight, 2015), in order to avoid conceptual confusion within this study the ubiquitous definition universally accepted and cited in TNE research from the Council of Europe (2002) is preferred. The Council define transnational higher education as:

> All types of higher education study programmes, or sets of courses of study, or educational services (including those of distance education) in which the learners are located in a country different from the one where the awarding institution is based. Such programmes may belong to the education system of a state different from the state in which it operates, or may operate independently of any national education system (COE, 2002).

Transnational arrangements are therefore complex, enabling awarding institutions that reside outside of a host nation to provide a variety of educational options to

international students who may not have the means or motivations to travel abroad. The Higher Education Statistics Agency (HESA, n.d) suggests more overseas students are engaging in TNE, with 2014-15 figures documenting a 3.9% increase on 2013-14 numbers. Therefore, a study that can contribute towards a better understanding of TNE partnerships may assist those already engaged in or those considering it as a strategy, to improve their overseas service.

This research sought to achieve this understanding by focusing on the development of social capital between operational faculty members delivering a particular type of TNE provision: 'joint programme' partnerships (JPPs). Both of the partnerships studied in this research operate as JPPs. JPPs offer overseas students the chance to either study wholly overseas, or transfer for a set period of time to the awarding institution, for example on 2+2, or 3+1 pathways. Such programmes vary in terms of delivery and the extent to which each partner is involved, with certain programmes offering block teaching models, leaving local academics to oversee the daily management of the programmes (QAA, 2013).


**TNE partnerships: exploring what binds partners together**

There is much to be gained from studying partnership literature to discover what the key features of a successful partnership look like, and how these can be attained. Business, management, health, organisational and educational research that study partnerships in a variety of formats offer rich insights into the mechanics of partnership work. *Partnership* discourse suggests that partnerships often evolve through a series of phases, such as initiation, operation and evaluation (Wohlstetter et al., 2005). The initiation stage is evident throughout TNE research, with inter-institutional partnerships often considered in light of their strategic significance and contribution towards competitive and global positioning (Sakamoto & Chapman, 2011; Zhuang, 2009). However, these studies only provide insight into the importance of initial relationship management in the establishing of international partnerships. Questions around the management and significance of operational relationships within TNE partnerships arguably remain unanswered.

A recent analysis of TNE literature by O'Mahony (2014) suggests that *partnership* is an under-researched area in TNE. She identifies 'globalisation, trade (TNE as marketplace), student experiences of TNE, student identity, student mobility and quality' (2014, p. 13) as the most frequently occurring research themes. Partnership, although acknowledged, does not feature as a predominant area of research. Researchers

focusing specifically on TNE therefore seem to view partnership as a means to an end, a way of exploring other aspects such as strategic management and pedagogy, rather than as something worth studying for its own sake.

However, certain studies do contribute to our understanding of TNE partnerships. For example, Austin & Foxcroft (2011) identify: a desire by partners to mutually learn, the importance of an in-house partnership champion, senior management support, and a commitment to flexibility and dynamism as being critically important to a partnerships success. They reinforce the need for trust and communication between partners, identifying operational staff as key agents in the development of partnership longevity and success. Further work by Heffernan and Poole (2005) suggests that for international partnerships to survive, a better understanding of their construction and management is required. They emphasise that 'effective relationships are at once among the most critical and least studied elements of international business partnerships' (2005, p. 227), arguing that research into relationship management can significantly contribute to a partnership's overall success.

This view is endorsed by Spencer-Oatey (2012), who illustrates the key challenges facing operational faculty members working in cross-cultural teams, such as building mutual trust and understanding amongst participants so that 'there is enough "glue" to hold them together' (2012, p. 257). Shared language, communication strategies and styles allude to the importance of social capital (Eddy, 2010). Yet Spencer-Oatey (2012), similarly to Austin and Foxcroft (2011), whilst identifying key partnership features, does not explore how faculty member operational interactions can affect the development of these key attributes. Whilst previous research is critical in championing the importance of faculty members in the development of international collaborative ventures, few offer insights into how key partnership features such as trust, reciprocity, cooperation, and communication develop between operational faculty members, or why this even matters. However, an analysis of *partnership* literature in educational contexts suggests that social capital is a key component of a partnership (Dhillon, 2013; Eddy, 2010), strengthening networks, trust and cohesion between members.

A further analysis of *partnership* in general business and health care contexts, highlights the importance of social capital in partnership management and development (Murphy et al., 2012) whereby it facilitates interunit resource exchange, cooperation, reciprocity, and value creation (Alder & Kwon, 2002). It can be understood as 'goodwill that is engendered by the fabric of social relations, and that can be mobilised to facilitate

action' (Alder & Kwon, 2002, p. 17). Its success therefore depends on relations developed between actors; it is not under the exclusive ownership of one particular partner (Burt, 1997).

Several sociologists such as Bourdieu (2006), Lin (2001) and Putnam (2000, 1993a, 1993b), who have explored social capital, provide conceptual ideas through which to analyse and evaluate existing TNE literature in relation to social capital. By systematically analysing the initiation, operation and evaluation phase of a TNE partnership's lifecycle, it becomes clear that in TNE, social capital is predominately perceived as something required by strategic and senior HE managers who wish to initiate overseas ventures (Zhuang, 2009). Cleary, this should not be the case. Allen et al., (2010) argue that whilst partnership structures and systems can assist in the development of relations between partners, such as dictating communication platforms and channels, success depends on how individuals across the partnership develop relationships. In a TNE context, it therefore seems logical to suggest that operational staff members are equally as important as senior managers in developing partnership relations.

Bourdieu (1980) seemingly concurs, suggesting that for social capital to maintain its value, *all individuals* must invest effort. He discusses social capital in relation to key facets such as resources (physical and mental), position (individual agent), networks, relationships, and continuous value (benefit) over time. Lin (2001) concurs describing social capital as the resources embedded in social networks, accessed and/or mobilised for purposive action. These definitions are not specific to senior managers or phases of a partnership's lifecycle. They should be evident at all stages of the partnership's operation, yet in TNE literature there seems to be little research that evidences the need for, and the growth of, social capital at the operational stage.

Although the work of Heffernan and Poole (2004, 2005) and Shore and Groen (2009) is significant in enhancing our understanding of the importance of building social capital in international educational partnership contexts, there is little understanding of *how* operational faculty members develop and manage social capital in their cross-border partnerships, and *why* it matters. By using the contributions made by other academics in this field, a new line of investigation has been identified. Since previous work often focuses on the development of social capital between senior management throughout the initiation phase of an overseas partnership, there is little documented on how operational faculty members' relationships continue to develop this initial social capital. Moreover,

there is little research that contributes to an understanding of what enhances and limits social capital at the operational level. This study therefore sought to address this lacuna.

**Boundary-spanning: partnerships, social capital, and driving change**

Having identified the importance of social capital in facilitating cooperation, reciprocation, and cohesion amongst partners, it seems fair to argue that social capital may not emerge so easily in TNE partnerships due to the complex nature of TNE partnership types and structures. International ventures require an understanding of a myriad of issues, including: culture, heritage, language, geographic location and time difference (Oerting & Buergi, 2006). All these can affect partner interactions and may inhibit strong connectivity, commitment, face-to-face contact, trust, and resource exchange. Nevertheless, it is argued that to overcome some of the challenges facing international alliances, boundary spanning can be utilised to build relationships and assist in the transfer of knowledge (Holmes & Smart, 2009).

The 'boundary spanner' is considered to be an individual who has a dedicated job role or responsibility to work in a collaborative environment. They coordinate, facilitate and service 'the processes of collaboration between a diverse set of interests and agencies' (Williams, 2013, p. 19). Furthermore, boundary spanners are individuals who can 'span the boundaries between disparate entities and champion the goals of the partnership in multiple settings' (Luce, 2005, p. 26), thereby establishing healthy patterns of communication, as well as expressing commitment to common goals. These individuals operate as brokers and gatekeepers and manage the interface between organisations and their environments (Katz & Kahn, 1966). They also assist in information processing, resource acquisition, and ensuring the legitimacy of certain practices. Moreover, the spanner must be 'adept at resolving many kinds of emergent tensions within cross-sector partnerships' (Ryan & O'Malley, 2016 p.3) whilst at the same time 'faithfully representing their own organisation' and being empathetic to the conditions that surround partner organisations (Ryan & O'Malley, 2016 p.3). Furthermore, their role is important in providing innovation and structural change (Aldrich & Herker, 1977). The boundary spanner, due to their position within the partnership, is key in the development of networks and alliances, increasing the transference of knowledge between stakeholders, and enabling them to forge connections that inspire new initiatives (Holmes & Smart, 2009). The spanner therefore plays a number of important roles including building effective inter and intra-personal

relationships, as well as demonstrating the ability to manage and negotiate between stakeholder groups (Williams, 2002).

This study therefore sought to explore whether boundary spanning can assist in the development of social capital between operational faculty members operating TNE JPPs and if so, how does it help and what effects does this have?

**Methodology**

A multiple-case study design comprising of two Sino-British partnerships was utilised for the purposes of this study. Both partnership cases, whilst operating out of the same host institution in China, are managed and controlled by two different UK HEIs. Figure 1 shows the composition of each case. The partnerships were chosen based on their structural differences; partnership B has a boundary spanner (*Gary)* employed and remunerated by UK HEI B, located in China, who oversees the programme. In contrast, partnership A has no boundary spanner.

The research sample comprised of 'faculty members' (academic members of staff, such as programme leaders, course leaders, module leaders, local tutors or academics) who were involved in the operational delivery of their JPP. This was to ensure that operational activities, key to each programmes delivery, were being discussed by individuals who had first-hand experience of what it takes to manage TNE programmes. It was deemed that whilst other stakeholders, such as senior managers and administrators, input into TNE delivery, their insights could not answer what this study was seeking to address: operational relationships and faculty member social capital.

Access to the sample was gained through the researcher's extensive TNE network. Only a small number of faculty members operate these programmes on behalf of their UK institutions. Therefore, whilst participant numbers seem low, the participation rates as a percentage were 100% of UKa and SinoXa for partnership A, and 50% of UKb and SinoXb for partnership B. All faculty working in China are expatriates from either Europe, Canada or the USA. All faculty working in the UK are from either the UK or Europe. Data collection comprised of semi-structured interviews, each lasting between 70-90 minutes, with faculty members in both the UK and China sharing their experiences of working on a TNE JPP.

Interview questions were separated into four distinct stages, with each stage containing several semi-structured questions. As the interviews progressed, further exploratory questions were asked depending on the answers provided by the participants.

Stage one sought to build rapport and explore participant thoughts on transnational higher education, their previous experiences and current role within their TNE partnership. Stage two was concerned with examining their thoughts on the term *partnership* and how they develop partner relations. Stage three was concerned with participants' daily operational activities and interactions, with stage four exploring each participant's own professional and personal learning and development.

All interviews were conducted in English and transcribed and coded using a method for thematically analysing qualitative data, known as template analysis (King, 2012). An initial set of themes was generated based upon an analysis of the literature, and included (for example) themes around 'roles', 'responsibilities', and 'communication strategies.' These created a provisional and tentative thematic platform that could be subsequently modified in light of further transcripts. This iterative process enabled a master template to develop for each faculty group in the UK and China, and then for each partnership A and B.
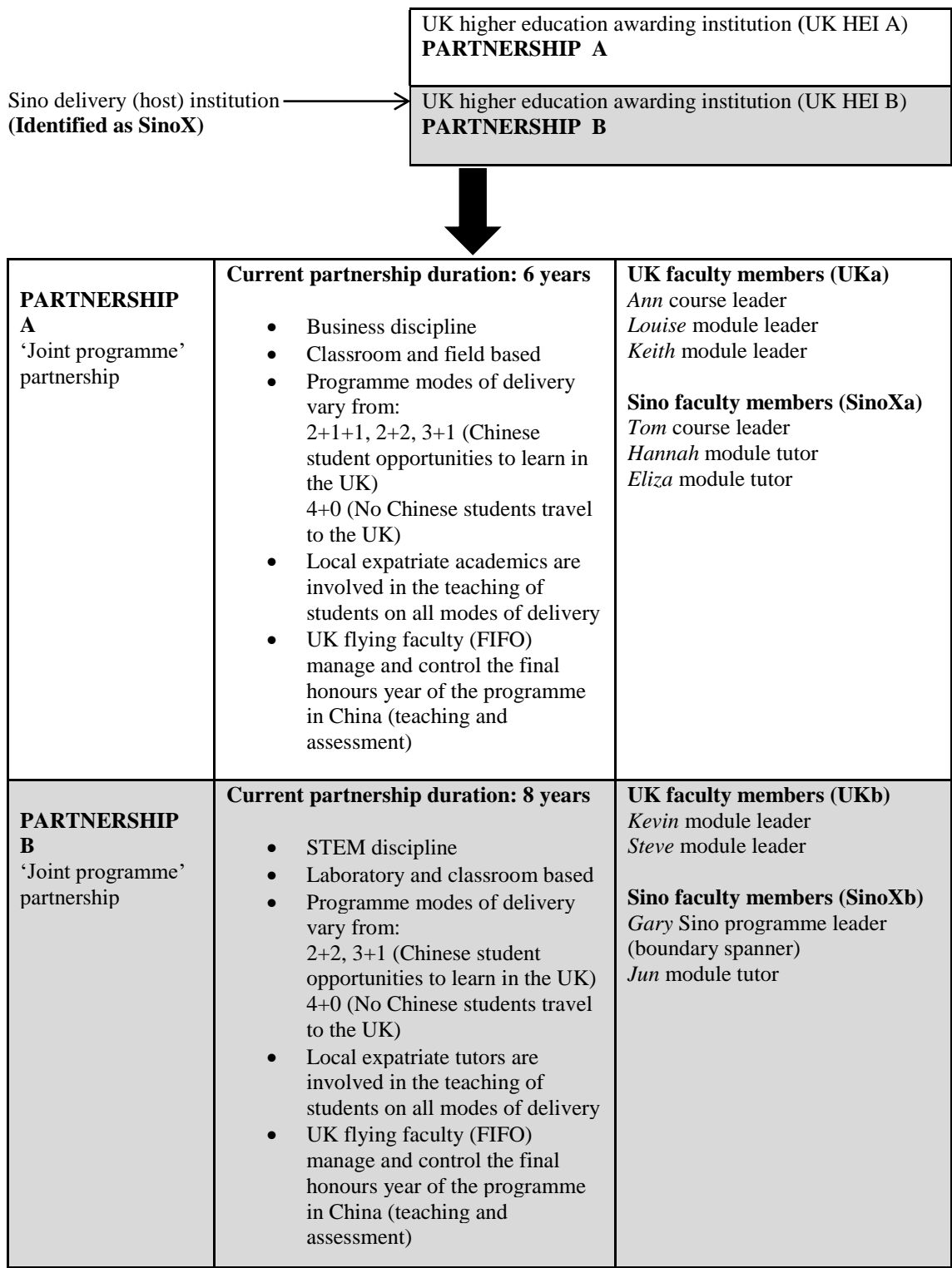
| | | |
|---|---|---|
| | UK higher education awarding institution (UK HEI A) **PARTNERSHIP A** | |
| Sino delivery (host) institution **(Identified as SinoX)** ⟶ | UK higher education awarding institution (UK HEI B) **PARTNERSHIP B** | |

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|---|---|---|
| **PARTNERSHIP A** 'Joint programme' partnership | **Current partnership duration: 6 years**<br><br>• Business discipline<br>• Classroom and field based<br>• Programme modes of delivery vary from:<br>2+1+1, 2+2, 3+1 (Chinese student opportunities to learn in the UK)<br>4+0 (No Chinese students travel to the UK)<br>• Local expatriate academics are involved in the teaching of students on all modes of delivery<br>• UK flying faculty (FIFO) manage and control the final honours year of the programme in China (teaching and assessment) | **UK faculty members (UKa)**<br>*Ann* course leader<br>*Louise* module leader<br>*Keith* module leader<br><br>**Sino faculty members (SinoXa)**<br>*Tom* course leader<br>*Hannah* module tutor<br>*Eliza* module tutor |
| **PARTNERSHIP B** 'Joint programme' partnership | **Current partnership duration: 8 years**<br><br>• STEM discipline<br>• Laboratory and classroom based<br>• Programme modes of delivery vary from:<br>2+2, 3+1 (Chinese student opportunities to learn in the UK)<br>4+0 (No Chinese students travel to the UK)<br>• Local expatriate tutors are involved in the teaching of students on all modes of delivery<br>• UK flying faculty (FIFO) manage and control the final honours year of the programme in China (teaching and assessment) | **UK faculty members (UKb)**<br>*Kevin* module leader<br>*Steve* module leader<br><br>**Sino faculty members (SinoXb)**<br>*Gary* Sino programme leader (boundary spanner)<br>*Jun* module tutor |

**Figure 1:** Research sample: Partner institutions and partnership configuration

## Research findings and discussion

By engaging in a comparative analysis of the interview transcripts, it became possible to identify four themes that influenced the operational management of both partnership A and B: *time, legacies, cultural difference,* and *resourcing*. However, further analysis

revealed that each partnership takes a very different managerial approach, meaning the four factors evolved and manifested in disparate ways, thereby having very different effects on the development of social capital.

*Time*

Findings suggest that operational faculty members are concerned with time. Participants discussed how time influences their communication, service levels, response times, and motivation. However, findings suggest that operational relationships can be improved, simply by changing faculty members' *perceptions of time*. For example, in the case of partnership A, time is perceived as being in short supply:

> [A] lot more time should be spent on research and communication with the UK. It would improve, and they would see us as having more time to develop the course. We don't have time to improve the course…we don't have time with workloads, it is difficult *(Eliza A)*.

> By the time I get into work, their day is going to be over, I've got to do this now, so I stay up sometimes until three, four o'clock in the morning to get these emails out of the way. I have to get them sorted, or else they wake up still waiting for answers *(Ann A)*.

It seems faculty members perceive different time zones and high workloads as impacting on their ability to cope with their programme and develop meaningful relationships. *Ann, Louise* (UKa) *Eliza* and *Hannah* (SinoXb) all expressed feelings of "loneliness" and "frustration" with a lack of time being fundamental to why they felt unable to develop meaningful relationships. They perceived themselves as *victims of time*, unable to manage it or engage in meaningful transactions which would enhance their collegiality, engagement, and connectivity.

In contrast, by implementing a different managerial model, UKb and SinoXb evidence how *time can be manipulated*. By seconding a senior academic (*Gary*) from the UK to China, *Gary* is able to directly answer SinoXb requests and access senior management at UK HEI B should decisions need referring back to the awarding institution. *Gary* believes the help and support he gets from UK HEI B is due to the fact "I've worked for them there and I'm still working for them". To *Gary*, this "makes a huge difference", whereby he provides his Sino team with timely and relevant information, as well as instant access to decision makers back in the UK. Regarding one academic misconduct issue, *Gary* and *Jun* explain:

> I got on the phone to [UK HEI B] and said "look, this is how it is" and explained it to him [DEAN] and he said "actually, I think you are right" (*Gary B*).

> [I]f we have a problem here, *Gary* can get it sorted through phone calls or emails in minutes…he gets immediate information…he is our rock *(Jun B).*

Furthermore, *Jun* explains how *Gary* helps them understand and prioritise operational tasks, meaning things progress more efficiently and effectively:

> He fully understands the requirements, we are all so busy, but when he says "hey I need these for the QAA" and explains to us, the team are on his side, and say "right ok then, let's begin" *(Jun B)*

Clearly, time is a critical component in the delivery of transnational programmes. Yet it can take time to get answers to questions. Furthermore, it takes time to design pedagogical and managerial activities and processes that create beneficial outcomes that satisfy UK and Chinese stakeholders. Yet, it seems by having a boundary spanner, there is a noticeable difference in how faculty members gain access to information and how quickly they are able to mobilise it as a resource for purposive action (Lin, 2001). Although time can never be *increased*, it seems boundary spanners can shift faculty member's *perceptions of time*, and what can be done in the time available, thereby improving operational fluidity.

### *Legacies*

To fully understand a partnership, its local history needs to be analysed in terms of the issues and challenges that have shaped it over time (Engeström, 2001). Therefore, any communication issues, and general engagement problems within a partnership must be considered against a backdrop of previous and present engagements. The findings suggest that previous encounters do influence present engagements between staff members.

In the case of partnership A, findings highlight how dominating lines of communication, established during the initiation phase of a partnership, can undermine present and future interactions between operational staff. It seems that the attitudes adopted by senior managers at UK HEI A towards SinoX have informed the approach taken by UKa in dealing with SinoXa:

Well the mind-set I was taught under [X person] when we went in was "right we are in charge, this is our degree, our names are on it we are the powerful ones"…get control, show we are in charge *(Ann A).*

This tone of engagement has created issues for partnership A, whereby historical transactions have shaped the way in which faculty members react to each other. Findings suggest that the dominating attitude of UKa has created a breakdown in the way UKa and SinoXa communicate and engage in activities, with a lack of respect and trust evident between the partners:

[E]very time I've taken the iron-fist away, if you take your eye off the ball, for a week, two weeks, something will happen…it sometimes feels a little bit like looking after a nursery *(Ann A).*

[T]hey are very sceptical…they see it as a negative experience, that we're trying to expose their weaknesses…so they come at it from a very negative point of view…it's about <u>exposing them</u>, rather than supporting them. This makes it hard work (*Louise A*).

It therefore seems that historical actions and activities can shaped present and future interactions both positively and negatively, thereby influencing the development of social capital. To evaluate the validity of this claim, partnership B offers insight into how an alternative managerial approach can alter relationships. SinoXb evidence a series of positive previous transactions that are seemingly founded on good communication, openness and a clear understanding of what the UK partner requires in terms of standards:

[W]e have built a strong relationship with the UK, preparing lecture notes or assessments, the quality of our assessments- the feedback we get, helps build trust, doing the bread and butter stuff, hitting the right standards this helps in their eyes [UK HEI B], it sets us up as a genuine group of people doing a genuine job *(Gary B).*

I really ensure, you know that [UK HEI B] standards are upheld…done the right way *(Gary B).*

Findings suggest that *Gary* ensures his team are briefed and informed on matters that affect their professional reputations and the integrity of the partnership. Furthermore, it seems *Gary* uses his knowledge of working in UK HE to explain to his team the importance of certain UK processes:

[*Gary*] puts this across to us, explains to us, we need this, because emails are limited. I mean with emails there is still the limitation of trying to explain stuff. I mean how do you try to explain the QAA to somebody? You can't do this on emails. What's the purpose and what is the significance for us? so that's *Gary's* role *(Jun B)*.

UKb findings concur, suggesting that "Big G" *(Gary)* is critical in keeping the Sino team up to date with relevant information, thereby lubricating the interactions of UK and Sino faculty members. Since the partnership's initiation, *Gary* has seemingly made it easier for operational staff to connect and converse:

Big G! Yeah, he deals with academic issues over there. G brings that link, something extra, because he understands the environment here you know? He bridges the gap…if anyone out there needs to query something, he directs them to the correct person, which makes life easier *(Kevin B)*.

In the case of partnership B, each time an outcome meets expectations, trusting attributes are reinforced, with the outcomes becoming part of the history of the relationship, increasing the chance that partners will engage positively in future interactions (Vangen & Huxham, 2003). *Gary* is a key figure in ensuring outcomes yield benefits for all those involved, thereby improving future interactions. Moreover, *Keith* (UKa) recognises the value of a boundary-spanner, perceiving this as a way of improving relations between his team and SinoXa:

[T]hey become an ambassador for the course, they become a beacon for the university they become a conduit that the other staff can tap into, and link back to the host institution, and that's missing…what's the connection to [UK HEI A] other than the name on slides and the degree certificate? There isn't and that's the one thing I would change *(Keith A)*.

**Cultural difference**

Though it is possible to standardise motives, cultural terms, and values across one team who operate in one county, it is not as easy when two or more different cultural teams work together. In TNE the cultural differences and educational traditions of the awarding and host countries may create different opinions about how educational programmes should operate (Heffernan & Poole, 2004). This may create tensions between those operating TNE programmes, with partnership A being testament to this:

[C]ompletely different sets of standards, expectations…that's where the variables come in because of the level of expectation that we have, we expect China to

behave in a certain way and they don't, China expect us as a leading institution to behave in a particular way and we don't *(Ann A)*.

Different cultural understandings and approaches to higher education may mean faculty members are unable to find workable solutions to daily problems. Motives underpinning operational activities may therefore be conflicted, with operational teams deciding to follow their own institution's agendas in order to satisfy local stakeholders, rather than following mutually agreed rules and objectives:

> [F]ear that if boxes aren't ticked, and their performance is- you know everything is very measured over there…in a quantitative way…which is completely different to what we have here…if the boxes aren't ticked the tutor hasn't performed well *(Ann A)*.

Partnership A further highlights these tensions, whereby UKa discuss how SinoXa seemingly inflated student grades to satisfy the requirements of local stakeholders at the expense of the programme's reputation:

> [M]y perception that the student marks were inflated in certain areas. We put the brakes on *(Ann A)*.

As *Louise* (UKa) identifies, these situations can create operational tensions that are not conducive to increased connectivity and trust:

> [Y]ou know we can't just shift things up to fit in with your statistics, it's got to be credible. We have standards don't we? So that wasn't the standard we expected, how do you negotiate and work on something that's non-negotiable? *(Louise A)*.

Further activities, including UK quality audits, or spot-checks conducted by Chinese authorities, may also be misinterpreted by operational teams. Partnership A highlights the tensions this creates, when the course leader at Sino X requested data from UKa for auditing purposes:

> [D]ealing with the Chinese side…they're always asking for information...please understand, I have to do it, I have to ask [UKa] and I have to get the information *(Tom A)*.

In contrast, partnership B illustrates how openly-communicated shared objectives, coupled with a willingness to collaborate and negotiate solutions, can make operational environments easier to manage. This requires all stakeholders to engage in meaningful

and transparent conversations and develop shared objectives that lead to the implementation of beneficial operational practices. To aid this process, *Gary* acts as a knowledge broker and translator (Williams, 2013) between the UK and Chinese stakeholders, articulating the requirements of each party to one another:

> I have roles here in China, and my UK position as well and they all want something! I try not to let the partners deal with each other. I am in the best position to do that because I have the knowledge, back in the UK they have no idea. The Chinese? all they want is information and I can just provide that. The UK are quite happy to let me deal with it *(Gary B)*.

This insight suggests *Gary's* role is critical in facilitating coordination and communication, and resolving dilemmas accruing from individual and collective operational activities (Ryan & O'Malley, 2016) such as quality audits. Moreover, *Gary* uses his position to build relationships between the partners and resolve emerging operational tensions. He does this by appreciating the needs of both his Chinese stakeholders and his UK institution, and mediating between the two. In the case of academic misconduct, he evidences this balancing act:

> [T]his was quite a big one and we solved it…a lot of communication with the UK, but also a lot of discussion within the team [SinoXb] about how to best approach it…but they are the awarding body and they have the final say because they are the awarding institution and that's how it needs to be *(Gary B)*.

Literature suggests the boundary spanner, as an interpreter and communicator, needs to appreciate the 'different cultures, motivations, gazes, and practices of a wide range of individuals and organisations' (Williams, 2013 p. 21). The spanner must be able to 'articulate the frames of many actors and interpret those frames in the context of collective action' (2013, p.21). In the context of partnership B, *Gary* seems able to manage and translate multiple stakeholder requirements, which although taking time, certainly brings clarity to operational delivery:

> I have [Chinese stakeholder] who wants a description of the number of hours per week for tutorials, lectures, but the UK modules were designed over a ten week semester and we do fourteen weeks here…so that messes up the timetables...you'll have the [Chinese stakeholder] come up with a number, for total hours and your timetable will say it's something else!…it takes time to translate and organise, but it brings clarity *(Gary B)*.

Finally, literature suggests boundary spanners can be catalysts for innovation and transformation (Holmes & Smart 2009). Through the building of relationships and social

capital, the spanner facilitates knowledge exchange (Williams, 2013). This process of sharing knowledge enables boundary spanners to identify innovative opportunities, or facilitate in connecting agents who have similar interests. *Jun* describes a new development within his partnership and attributes this to good working relationships enhanced by "open mindedness" and *Gary:*

> *Gary* is a key reason the rapport, the good rapport is so strong…now we are looking to expand. We are getting more new staff and there is talk of developing a Masters degree programme *(Jun B).*

Certainly, partner institutions should consider the style of management and leadership required to make cross-cultural ventures a success. Programme leaders and/or course leaders should act as role models, encouraging the development of cultural sensitivity, patience and understanding across and within operational teams (Jin, 1989). To deal with problems and challenges effectively and efficiently, TNE JPPs require good cross-cultural leadership, transparency and honesty. In the case of partnership B, these factors were enhanced by having a boundary spanner. By uniting teams and encouraging them to forge connections and engage in mutually beneficial activities, such as the joint creation of teaching and assessment materials, platforms for relevant and complementary transactions can occur.

## *Resourcing*

Resources are a critical part of social capital, with Bourdieu (2006) and Lin (2001) referring to resource exchange as being fundamental in its development. For example, findings suggest that intangible resources, such as tacit knowledge; time; and advice; and tangibles, such as facilities; human capital; and labour need to be provided if operational team relationships are to develop and strengthen over time. However, depending on a faculty member's position within the operational team, not all members may have access to these resources, or be able to mobilise them for beneficial action (Lin, 2001). Certain team members may control the flow of resources and this influences team morale, as *Eliza* (SinoXa) explains:

> [F]or instance our boss *Tom,* he doesn't disseminate the information, so we lack that, we end up knowing about things very last minute…I feel we cannot go directly to the UK and get those answers, it must go through *Tom…* we don't get the true answer *(Eliza A).*

Moreover, as staff leave the partnership and new recruits join, resources such as tacit knowledge deplete, meaning resource transmission between the awarding and host operational teams becomes even more salient:

> [A]ll the team is new. Everyone is new…my partner from the UK disappears no-one can help me in my team so this really is a problem *(Hannah A).*

*Louise* (UKa) further explains the effect this has on UK moral and their feelings towards working with SinoXa:

> [W]ell it's, it's tiring isn't it? You don't really develop a relationship, you start to develop a relationship and then they move on…and you're back at the beginning, you go through the same stuff time after time after time *(Louise A).*

In contrast, partnership B's findings suggest consistency in personnel is down to good management and recruitment processes, which are overseen by their boundary spanner *Gary.* Whilst this is not to suggest operational relationships in partnership A could be improved simply by employing a boundary spanner; findings do suggest that having a seconded individual at the host institution does make a noticeable difference, in the minds of staff members, to resource access, transfer and management:

> [I] am concerned with staffing obviously and laboratories, equipment and stuff. If I can justify why we need something, I have never had a problem getting the things we need *(Gary B).*

> You need somebody from that side [UK] to really understand the reasons for a task that we need to get done…it makes it a lot easier, I mean you could try dictation, but I don't think that be effective at all *(Jun B)*

> I think having that link brings something extra…he understands the environment here…it helps bridge the gap *(Kevin B).*

Clearly, access to both tangible and intangible resources embedded in a partnership network greatly assists faculty members in the pursuit of purposive action (Lin, 2001). Should partnership infrastructures inhibit access to resources or prevent them being transferred within and across teams, then it becomes harder for operational faculty to perform their jobs to the best of their abilities. As performance suffers, benefit becomes harder to identify, leaving faculty members questioning their own value and significance, creating a disconnect between operational members. It is this disconnect

that challenges the growth of social capital (Alder & Kwon, 2002). Findings suggest that boundary spanning can make a difference to resource exchange and utilisation.

## Conclusion: boundary spanning, can it enhance operational faculty members' social capital?

As stated in the introduction, policy moves have enhanced the space for international co-operation and competition in HE. Overseas initiatives now play an increasingly important role in contemporary higher education, providing HEIs with revenue, competitive advantage and global advertising opportunities. It is therefore essential that those tasked with their delivery understand how to maintain and develop them over time so to meet the challenges of new open information environments. This study sought to contribute towards an understanding of one particular international initiative -JPPs- and how they can be improved, by focusing on the development of operational faculty member social capital in transnational educational contexts. From the evidence presented it seems that JPPs that facilitate and develop high levels of social capital between operational faculty members function more effectively than those that do not.

First, this study identified four key themes that influence the operational management of both partnerships: *time, legacies, cultural difference* and *resourcing.* The research then sought to understand if there was any evidence that boundary spanning, as a key differentiator between the two partnerships, had any influence on the development of faculty member social capital. In response, findings suggest that 'boundary spanning' (Williams, 2013, p.17), can be used to improve social capital. Whilst it would be wrong to suggest that boundary spanning is the only reason partnership B operates and generates higher levels of social capital than A, in this particular case, it was viewed by those operating partnership B as being critical. Since partnership A has no experience of boundary spanning, other than *Keith* (UKa) recognising its value, it became evident that boundary spanning was a key reason why the two partnerships performed so differently.

However, it must be noted that *Gary* and *Jun* did acknowledge that they felt operating a STEM subject gave them higher kudos in China than other business-related disciplines. Subsequently, they felt they had certain freedoms that other licensed courses were not privy to, such as less managerial interference due to their institutional rank and professional status, and more funding for physical resources, such as laboratories. Whilst this arguably enhances operational contexts and working relationships, it was *not* reported with the same significance or frequency as boundary spanning.

The process of boundary spanning is to 'build a bridge between two different organisations or between two or more different people coming from different cultures' (Newman, 1992, p. 149). Boundary spanners seek to 'service the processes of collaboration between a diverse set of interests and agencies' (Williams, 2013, p. 19) and achieve this predominately through a transmitting and information-processing role. Individuals who can interpret and broker knowledge between culturally diverse groups need an appreciation of the different cultures, motivations and practices of a wide range of people, organisations and sectors. Moreover, these roles need an individual who can foster and sustain effective interpersonal relationships mediated through trust, and who has a proven ability in communication, empathy, consensus building and negotiation (Williams, 2013). Partnership B seemingly evidences the value of a seconded staff member who can act as an interpreter, communicator, and co-ordinator for the overseas delivery team.

The findings presented here suggest, depending on the infrastructure adopted by TNE partners, that boundary spanning can positively enhance social capital, by improving key social capital features, such as connectivity, resource transfer, and cooperation. All these lead to greater levels of trust and reciprocation between faculty members, reflecting the work of sociologists such as Putnam (1993a & 1993b). Spanning gives overseas faculty members immediate access to intangible resources such as support, ideas, and tacit knowledge that assist them in delivering outcomes that meet UK requirements. UK protocols and traditions are seemingly better communicated, and operational tasks therefore more aligned with UK requirements. The effect is to enhance operational activity design and production, whilst reducing the possibility of outcomes falling short of the expectations of awarding partners. However, TNE JPPs' structures and systems must be flexible enough to take advantage of the work of boundary spanners. Partner institutions must be willing to acknowledge the information transferring and consider reconfiguring policies and processes that facilitate and supports the boundary spanner's endeavours (Alexander et al., 2016), thereby enhancing relationships and partnership innovation over time.

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