Transnational higher education partnerships and the role of operational faculty members: developing an alternative theoretical approach for empirical research

Claudia M Bordogna[1]

Abstract

For too long, transnational higher education (TNE) has been linked to discourse predominately focused upon strategic implementation, quality assurance and pedagogy. Whilst these aspects are important when designing and managing overseas provisions, there is a lack of research focusing on the social interactions that influence the pace and development of TNE partnerships. This gap is particularly evident at the operational phase of TNE partnerships. This conceptual article therefore offers an alternative way in which to research TNE partnerships, in relation to the interactions of faculty members delivering at the operational level. It provides an integrated theoretical framework, comprising of three different theoretical approaches in order to provide a conceptual tool in which to investigate and evaluate TNE partnership development. The article concludes that by understanding how relationships develop between faculty members tasked with delivering TNE, international partnerships can be significantly strengthened in terms of their progression and value.

Keywords

---

[1] Corresponding author: c.bordogna@hud.ac.uk University of Huddersfield

Introduction

Today's higher education community operates in a complex and dynamic global environment (Naidoo, 2009), whereby global changes, stimulated by a reduction in trade and communication barriers, as well as other 'globalising tendencies' (Bennell & Pearce, 2002, p. 216) have prompted higher education institutions to reconsider their attitudes towards internationalisation. One method for realising international opportunities afforded by neo-liberal policies is to develop international educational partnerships (Chan, 2004). These partnerships, if designed correctly, offer institutions a way to satisfy commercial objectives, whilst also assisting in the development of global knowledge transfer and citizenship (Brookes & Becket, 2011).

Critical to the success of any TNE partnership, is the way in which faculty members interact with, share and negotiate tasks and outcomes that suit the requirements of a multitude of stakeholders (Bolton & Nie, 2010). Relationship management and the generation of social capital are therefore critical in the development of successful and sustainable partnerships (Dhillon, 2015).

This conceptual article is concerned with exploring how social relationships develop within TNE partnerships. It particularly focuses on the way relationships develop between faculty members who operationalise these overseas programmes. The paper offers a theoretical framework in which to explore faculty member operational interactions and the affect they have on TNE partnership progression and maturity. In the context of this article, operational faculty members are defined as those who have a direct responsibility for the teaching and learning of overseas students, such as module leaders, local tutors, course leaders or equivalent representatives, who operate at both the awarding and hosting higher education

institutions (HEIs). These individuals are at the coal-face, concerned with ensuring the daily management of these overseas educational programmes, which includes ensuring and overseeing programme delivery, quality, compliance, pedagogical content, assessment and feedback, as well as providing student support. I argue, that fundamental to the success of a TNE partnership are the social relationships which establish between these awarding and host operational faculty members, whereby these relationships I consider to be vital in the maintenance, development and survival of the transnational partnership over time (Amey, Eddy & Campbell, 2010).

I begin this conceptual paper by defining transnational education, before exploring the concept of *partnership* and the role undertaken by faculty members in the delivery and management of TNE partnerships. A conceptual definition of *partnership* is provided, through which it becomes possible to conceptualise *TNE partnerships* as being representative of two boundary-spanning interacting activity systems (Engeström, 2001). This conceptual approach makes it possible to analyse TNE operational phases in an alternative way, highlighting the important relationships that exist between dimensions such as the subject, rules, time, communities, motives, activity production and outputs, and artefacts. The paper continues by applying three theoretical frameworks, CHAT (Engeström, 2001), social action theory (Weber, 1978) and the transformational model of social action (TMSA) (Archer, 1998), whereby it becomes possible to analyse these dimensions, and to theorise as to what is potentially happening in terms of social interactions between faculty members, as well as how these interactions may be influencing TNE partnership developments over time.

This theoretical approach could assist HEIs, currently participating in TNE or considering it as an internationalisation strategy, to contemplate the design and management of their partnerships. By analysing what factors affect faculty member relations, and the subsequent effect these have on partnership development, alliances could be reconfigured, in order to improve the performance of current or future cross-border ventures. I begin by defining TNE for contextual purposes, before analysing partnership and TNE literary sources.

Exploring transnational higher education partnerships

Transformations in the strategic objectives of HEIs are now evident in the way they are integrating international strategies into their working practices (Knight, 2004). One approach is to develop collaborative links with one or more overseas higher education institutes where students can study for a foreign qualification without leaving their home country (British Council, 2013). Otherwise known as *transnational education* (TNE), UNESCO and The Council of Europe (2002) in their Code of Good Practice define it as:

> All types of higher education study programmes, or sets 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.

Furthermore, they define a *transnational arrangement* as:

> An educational, legal, financial, or other arrangement leading to the establishment of (a) collaborative arrangements, such as franchising, twinning, joint degree, whereby study programmes or parts of a course of study, or other educational services of the awarding institution are provided by

another partner institution. (b) non-collaborative arrangements, such as branch campuses, offshore institutions, corporate or international institutions.

TNE and transnational arrangements are therefore highly complex. Simply put, TNE allows degree awarding institutions, situated outside of a host nation, to provide a variety of educational provisions to international students, who may not have the means or motivation to travel abroad. More often than not, this requires some form of partnership between an awarding and hosting institution. Collaborating partners therefore need to find common ground in the way courses, arrangements and delivery methods operate.

TNE has seen a sharp increase in the last decade, with the Higher Education Statistics Agency (HESA) recording annual growth rates in *students studying wholly overseas* for a UK qualification through some form of overseas arrangement (table 1).

Insert Table 1: HESA 'Students in Higher Education 2013/14 & 2012/13' Table O

Arguably, these figures evidence the increasing significance of TNE to UK HEIs, who have sought to grow their share of the international student market by developing and expanding overseas provisions. Moreover, the data evidences the increasing need to ensure relationships with overseas partners remain positive, to ensure international students have the best experience of UK HE offshore.

TNE can take multiple forms, with numerous modes of cooperation existing between collaborating institutions (Healey & Bordogna, 2014). These can embrace a wide range of models: joint-programmes, branch campuses, distance-learning programmes, articulation and validation (QAA, 2010). Underpinning each of these

modes of delivery are complex structures and systems, whereby collaborating partners often have to find common ground through negotiation and compromise, whilst promoting resource exchanges and building trust (Amey et al., 2010).

To ensure international partnerships survive the dynamic international environments in which they are situated partnership structures must enable systems to achieve optimal levels of cooperation and collaboration. This often requires participating institutions to adopt new forms of distributed and coordinated agency (Keevers et al., 2014). As alliances grow in complexity and involve wider sets of stakeholders (Bolton & Nie, 2010) with varying objectives, understanding how partner groups interact and respond to each other offers a new way in which evaluate the development of TNE partnerships, and what can be done to potentially improve these overseas ventures.

Partnership implementation: operating transnational partnerships

By analysing *partnership* discourse from a series of business, education, health and management sources (Gray, 1989; Austin, 2000; Dhillon, 2015) the importance of the operational phase is evident (Wohlstetter, Smith & Malloy, 2005). However, this is not to suggest partnership initiation and evaluation is unimportant. Initial conditions play a vital role in establishing, framing and launching the partnership, with no amount of relationship building able to compensate for mistakes at initiation (Arino & de la Torre, 1998). Even though initiation is critical to a TNE partnerships success, it is often operational team members, through their daily activities, who provide the catalyst for partnership change and progression. Operational staff members are therefore often best placed to make recommendations as to the direction and needs of the partnership, as well as being critical in the implementation of possible solutions. Austin (2000) concurs, arguing, 'relationships at the top of a partner

organisation are necessary but not sufficient to sustain and grow a partnership'
(2000, p. 129).

Existing TNE partnership research often focuses on the initiation stage, with
inter-institutional relationships often considered in light of their strategic significance.
Research is often focused on the value of a partnership, and its role in the
achievement of strategic goals, competitive advantage and educational rankings
(Heffernan & Poole, 2004; Ayoubi & Al-Habaibeh, 2006). TNE partnership
researchers often conceptualise TNE ventures as *strategic tools*, whereby
transnational links function to service strategic internationalisation aims and
objectives (Fielden, 2008). This understanding, whilst offering valuable insights into
the rationale and value of transnational alliances to nations and educational sectors,
fails to explain *how* partnerships, once initiated, are able to sustain themselves over
time.

Despite the proclamation of initial benefits, partnerships are difficult to
manage and more complicated than senior management may initially think (Paul,
1990). Many partnerships fail or cannot be sustained for long periods of time,
suggesting that to fully understand how educational collaborations function, it is
important to look beyond the 'value added rhetoric' found in most calls for
educational alliances and to ask questions that examine the operational level of
partnership management (Amey et al., 2010, p. 335). Knight (2015), argues that TNE
creates complex operational environments in which academic staff members face
challenges around classroom management, plagiarism, workloads and negotiation
for grades. Furthermore, she maintains that operational phases do require strategic
forethought, but are 'often neglected until a problem occurs' (2015, p. 118). To rectify
this issue, she argues that:

[M]ore attention to these issues is required, to ensure that culturally diverse classrooms, campuses and faculty/management teams provide benefits not problems (2015, p. 118).

Existing TNE research which engages with the operational phase often stresses the importance of quality (Smith, 2010) and pedagogy (Bell, Smith & Vrazalic, 2008; Leask, 2008), with research often focused on exploring and improving these dimensions. For example, Australian academics who utilise operational phases often use the experiences of faculty members to contribute to an understanding of how professional development can assist in the delivery and maintenance of quality offshore trans-cultural education (Gribble & Ziguras, 2003; Dunn & Wallace, 2006; Debowski 2008). The empirical findings highlight the importance of quality and institutional support in the maintenance of international alliances. Whilst I am not suggesting quality and pedagogical issues are not important elements in TNE delivery, I simply serve to highlight the need to expand research beyond these facets. Faculty member experiences could be analysed in order to understand *how and what affects relationship development* between operational staff and the implications this has on TNE partnerships over time.

I am interested in investigating *how* and *why* faculty member relationships develop. How do operational tasks affect relationships between overseas colleagues? Do these activities affect resource exchange, reciprocation, confidence and trust, and if so what are the consequences? Are faculty members able to modify their practices in order to strengthen their relationships or are they somehow regulated and limited in being able to make changes that would significantly improve their relationships and partnerships over time? It is my intention to create a

theoretical framework in which to explore the operational phase of TNE, whereby

questions like these can be postulated in order to provide research communities with

further insights into operational relationship and their effect on TNE partnership

development.

Recent research conducted by Helms (2015) and Keay, May and O'Mahony

(2014) has sought to address certain operational issues. Helms (2015) suggests that

a key theme in the management of international education partnerships is that of

'faculty and staff engagement' (2015, p. 10). She stresses the importance of

commitment to the partnerships, whereby faculty members must feel able to

contribute to the future of international partnerships, as well as being supported in

terms of their working conditions and professional development. In addition, they

require adequate access to resources to enable them to perform their duties. Clearly

informative, the report provides an introduction into the role faculty members play in

managing and sustaining overseas partnerships. However, a more detailed analysis

of faculty member engagement could help us to identify and evaluate factors that

affect faculty member commitment and 'buy-in' (2015, p. 12). For example,

although commitment and resource access is paramount to the success of

international partnerships, how do HEI structures and systems influence this

willingness to share and participate? Moreover, could we use operational activities to

access the commitment of faculty member's?

By focusing on answering research questions centred on practice, delivery

challenges, and institutional support for transnational education, Keay et al. (2014)

sought to explore TNE partnerships by applying a communities of practice

framework. Although this is arguably the most comprehensive account of TNE

partnership development produced thus far, there are limits to their research. By

applying the characteristics of a community of practice of joint enterprise, mutual engagement and shared repertoire, their aim was to focus on the quality of relations that reside 'between partners for the enhancement of practice' (2014, p. 252). The research engages with 'heads, leads or managers of UK HE transnational programmes' with 'sufficient seniority' in 'managing' such arrangements (Keay et al., 2014, p. 252), yet does not involve overseas partners in their assessments of working relationships, shared repertoire and engagement. Therefore, it would now be helpful to move on to analyse TNE partnerships in a way that acknowledges the whole international community involved. Moreover, although the concept of communities of practice is useful in analysing how operational faculty interact and learn within TNE contexts, it was not developed with the analysis of international partnerships in mind. By exploring *partnership* literature further and identifying key partnership characteristics, it becomes possible to consider other dimensions that may affect faculty member engagement and learning over time.

Further work on international partnerships by Taylor (2016) suggests that international partnerships comprise of nine stages. He maintains the operational phase is important in building links, formalising and deepening the partnership. The work identifies the importance of 'champions' (2016, p.48) in developing international relationships, and the importance of delegating responsibility to academic teams. However, the study only serves to aid our understanding of partnership as a series of stages, cementing the work of previous academics on the subject of partnership (Gray 1989). No further understanding as to how relationships form and are affected by interactions over time is evident.

Developing a model delineating the key success factors in international education partnerships, Heffernan and Poole (2005) identify effective

communication, trust and commitment as being the most significant variables for the

development of effective international partnerships. Based on a study of senior

partners involved in 10 partnerships, their study identifies key activities, such as

face-to-face communication, as being significant in driving effective communication.

Furthermore, their work recognises the importance of 'doing the 'little things'' (2005,

p.237) in order to develop trust, such as delivering on promises. However, a deeper

analysis of how this translates at the operational level and what these 'little things'

entail, as well as how they are encouraged, could arguably help us to understand

how to strengthen operational relationships over time.

Other approaches to understanding international partnerships are also

evident. Employing a social network analysis, Walton and Guarisco (2007) sought to

explore the way in which knowledge transfers between partners at individual, group

and organisational level. Whilst a useful quantitative tool for studying the patterns of

relations, sources of knowledge transfer, frequency and interactions between nodes,

social network analysis alone does not provide enough detail as to how actors feel

about each other, or how their connections are affected by external conditions such

as time, rules or resources. Clearly, successful partnership implementation requires

faculty members to work together across borders in the negotiation of tasks, whilst at

the same time being mindful of the affect a certain course of action may have on the

motivation and attitude of other members involved. To understand how and why

faculty member relationships develop and how this influences the way the TNE

partnership develops, one must try to understanding how agents *interpret action*, and

the subsequent psychological outputs this generates (Roth, 2007).

Whilst faculty member interactions and interpretations are important, these

agents do not operate, evaluate, and reconfigure their operational practices in a

vacuum. Other intertwining mechanisms aid in the development of the partnership, such as structures and systems (Huxham & Vangen, 2000). Structure is a key factor in shaping collaborative agendas, affecting operational systems and activities. Nevertheless, whilst the structure creates the operational framework, operational processes feedback, influencing structural change. Processes relating to communication, resource deployment and training can influence partnership agendas, producing structural reconfigurations over time. Material and social structures embedded in the partnership therefore both constrain and enable faculty members in the pursuit of partnership transformation.

This suggests whilst partnership structures create a framework for operating, faculty members are able to exercise a directional influence. Partnership operational structures and systems therefore need evaluating in relation to the influence they exert on faculty members, whilst faculty members need to evaluate their actions in relation to the effect these have on the transformation of partnership structures and processes over time (Archer, 2010). Based on the above analysis, the following section introduces a series of complementary theoretical frameworks that can assist researchers in an exploration of the operational phase of TNE partnerships.

Operational practices and faculty member relationships: developing an alternative theoretical approach for empirical research

Based on the aforementioned review of the operational phase of a TNE partnership, I argue, any analysis of the operational phase of a TNE partnership must consider a range of dimensions if research is to fully investigate and analyse faculty member TNE operational practices, relationships, and interactions, which have implications for the way in which the partnership progress over time. The dimensions are listed

below, and examples of what these features could look like in relation to the

operational phase of TNE are included:

1. The subject (an individual faculty member or faculty group)

2. Time (delays, zones, real time)

3. Structure and systems (rules, procedures, protocols, partnership contracts)

4. Community (partner institutions and their senior leaders, central governments, municipalities, quality agencies, parents, students)

5. Mediating artefacts/ resources (intangible: ideas, knowledge, support. Tangible: classrooms, leaning resources (books), examination papers)

6. The object of the operational activity (assessment and feedback practices, teaching and learning, field trips, peer- observation of teaching, VLE updates, course evaluations)

7. The output of the activity (grade awarding, awareness, learning, self-development, knowledge generation)

8. Motive (reason or motivation for doing an activity)

9. Psychological output (the emotions or feelings felt by the subject based on having engaged in and interpreted an activity and its output)

Based upon this analysis, it is possible to conceive of the operational phase of

a TNE partnership as an interacting activity system, whereby subjects (*faculty*

members) participate in collective action across boundaries (*TNE programme*

delivery) (Daniels, Edwards, Engeström, Gallagher, & Ludvigsen, 2010), whereby

faculty members produce activities that *contribute to the development* of the

partnership over time (Engeström, 2005). Figure 1 makes it possible to visualise

what two interacting faculty groups, from two different cultures, operating a TNE

partnership may look like. I therefore argue, that the application of third generation

cultural historical activity theory (CHAT) (Engeström, 2001) as an exploratory framework, can aid our understandings of TNE operational phases, by enabling researchers to contemplate a host of potential variables in relation to each other that have not been considered in this, within this context.

Insert Figure 1: Third generation cultural historical activity theory (Engeström 2001, p. 136).

Introducing cultural-historical activity theory (CHAT)

Cultural historical activity theory has evolved through three generations. Initially, it focussed on the work of Vygotsky, who explored the relationship between human activities and mediating artefacts, such as tools and signs (Engeström, 2005). Although insightful, the first generation was limited by its focus on individual actors. The second generation sought to overcome this problem. Developed by Leont'ev, second generation theory sought to differentiate between individual action and collective activity by considering rules, communities, and division of labour, thereby expanding Vygotsky's triangular model. The focus was now on complex interactions between the individual subject and their wider community. Finally, the third generation sought to develop ways to understand cultural diversity, multiple dialogues, perspectives, activity networks, and boundary crossing (Engeström, 2001).

Third generation CHAT provides more than just a visual stimulus. It contains five key principles that make it possible to analyse the operational phase of TNE partnerships in greater detail by considering the way mediating artefacts, legacies, multiple voices and perspectives, roles and responsibilities and learning influence

faculty member activities and outcomes (Engeström, 2001, pp. 136-137). The principles state:

- **Principle 1:** The prime unit of analysis in CHAT is the 'collective, artefact-mediated and object-oriented activity system, seen in its network relations to other activity systems' (Engeström, 2001, p. 136). This principle emphasises the value of investigating the collective work of agents, who utilise individual and shared resources, in the production of activities within particular contexts. These aspects all have the potential to affect activity production and output. The principle encourages researchers to look at faculty member interactions in relation to resources, contexts and outputs produced, and consider the effect each facet has on the development of operational relationships.

- **Principle 2:** The division of labour in an activity system creates multiple perspectives and 'different positions for the participants' (Engeström, 2001, p. 136). Depending on the role of the subject *(faculty member)* and their previous experiences, faculty members may undertake tasks in a variety of different ways, interpreting situations differently.

- **Principle 3:** 'Activity systems take shape and get transformed over lengthy periods of time' (Engeström, 2001, p. 136). *Faculty members* working in a TNE partnership need to consider partnership historicity and the effect legacies have on current and future operational practices.

- **Principle 4:** Contradictions between activity systems provide 'sources of change and development' (Engeström, 2001, p. 136). Tensions between transnational faculty groups may provide catalysts for change in operational practices.

- **Principle 5:** Activity systems contain the possibility of expansive transformation, whereby systems undergo change and 'embrace a radically wider horizon of

possibilities than in the previous mode of the activity' (Engeström, 2001, p. 136).

As *faculty members* engage in collective action across boundaries (Daniels et al., 2010), operational practices create contradictions and disturbances, which require resolution. As *faculty members* reflect on the value of current practices, they begin to question and deviate from established norms, ideally generating new forms of operational practices, thereby enhancing existing relationships.

Although third generation CHAT (Engeström, 2001) is useful in analysing the operational phase of a TNE partnership since it allows the subject (*faculty member*) to be investigated in relation to multiple dimensions, it carries limitations, whereby the aforementioned TNE partnership dimensions cannot fully be understood by solely applying CHAT. I therefore argue that CHAT requires further theoretical elaboration before empirical investigations commence.

Introducing the transformational model of social action (TMSA)

Although principle five of CHAT discusses how interacting activity systems have the potential to undergo 'expansive transformation', its abstract nature means application for the purposes of research is problematic. Therefore, the second theoretical framework to apply to CHAT is TMSA (Archer, 1998). Figure 2 depicts TMSA in its simplest form. Elements not explicit in CHAT, such as time (figure 2: observed as T^1, T^2 T^3 and T4), feedback loops, and the evolution of structure, fundamental to understanding TNE partnership development, become visible when TMSA is considered.

Insert Figure 2: Superimposing the transformational model of social action and the morphogenetic/ static cycle (Archer, 1998, p. 376)

So why is TMSA important? TMSA implies that faculty members, conditioned by their partnership's initial structure (which they may or may not have been party to), interact in the operational phase, producing outputs which see them reproducing (*morphostasis*) and subsequently transforming (*morphogenesis*) their partnership's structure over time.

By combining the structural elements of CHAT, with the transformational elements evident in TMSA, it becomes possible to explore the dynamic relationship between structure and agency in more detail. It also enables empirical researchers to analyse faculty member operational tasks in regard to their reproductive qualities, and how these type of practices have the potential to transform partnership structures over time. For example, TNE programmes with a flying faculty element may see this face-to-face activity generate greater understandings between faculty members. Whilst reproductive in nature (year on year), face-to-face contact could lead to increased levels of empathy and compassion developing between faculty members, whereby activities are jointly designed or negotiated to suit the contexts in which they are being implemented. Trust, commitment and communication are arguably enhanced (Heffernan & Poole, 2005), thereby strengthening relations and hopefully encouraging partnerships to transform and institutionalise over time (Amey et al., 2010). Other activities may simply slow or halt the possibility of positive transformation, such as tasks that create uncertainty, highlight cultural differences or require too much time to implement. Once the identification of these tasks has occurred, activities have the possibility of being redesigned and managed.

Introducing social action theory (SAT)

Although CHAT seeks to explore joint activity in the transformation of systems and social structures, the psychological effects of joint activities, which are important in

the development of integrative bonds between subjects (Molm, Whitham & Melamed, 2012), are not explicitly stated. If activities foster *psychological and social conditions* (Roth, 2007), then clearly activity design and participation is important in ensuring faculty member relations remain positive.

As faculty members engage in activities, they generate outcomes. These outcomes can cause 'ambiguity', and encourage 'sense making…and interpretation' (Engeström, 2001, p. 134) to take place. Therefore, depending on how faculty members *interpret the outcomes* of each other's activities, TNE partnerships may suffer from periods of tension or conflict, whereby communication distorts and relationships become strained affecting subsequent interactions. Operational activity systems should therefore aim to make faculty member interactions as positive as possible. Vygotsky (1989) claims the relationship between emotions; practical actions and reasoning are integral to the unit of activity, therefore making them dialectically related. This suggests faculty members, through their participation in operational practices have the ability to stimulate emotional states (Roth, 2007), which third generation CHAT or TMSA cannot explicate.

Interpretation, associated meanings and responses, form a critical aspect of social interaction, and social action theory (Weber, 1978) provides insight into the way actors interpret situations and apply meaning. Social action therefore enables the sense-making side of activity production to be explored. How faculty members understand and share their experiences with each other is arguably critical in helping them to understand the meanings behind each other's actions. In addition, this understanding helps in the production of responses, whereby Weber (1978) suggests the more we can appreciate the conditions surrounding other people, the more empathy is generated. Weber (1978) suggests 'rational certainty… and

empathetic certainty' (1978, p. 8) are important in helping individuals understand the actions of others. This is arguably critical to the development of relationships between operational faculty members. Face- to-face activities such as secondment and flying faculty may assist in the development of empathy. Furthermore, activities such as course evaluations, module evaluations, QAA audits and assessment and feedback strategies may be rationalised due to strict codified rules of engagement. Furthermore, how we understand each other's operational environment is very much dependent on the way the operational (activity) system is structured and managed.

It would be naïve for research focused on understanding operational faculty member relationships to neglect this psychological dimension. Social action therefore provides a third theoretical lens through which to analyse faculty member behaviour. It allows us to postulate how staff associate meaning and understand each other's operational tasks. Moreover, it allows us to discover which tasks stimulate positive responses and evaluate why that particular activity created that type of response.

Introducing an alternative theoretical approach: investigating the operational phase of TNE and the role of faculty members
By amalgamating the aforementioned theoretical frameworks, figure 3 offers an initial platform from which to launch an empirical investigation into TNE operational faculty member relationships, and how these relationships affect partnership development. The model can be applied to all types of TNE partners and all types of partnerships, for example Sino-British partners, operating distance learning, dual degrees, franchise or 'joint' programme partnerships.

To strengthen TNE partnerships over time, faculty member operational activities ideally need to meet or exceed stakeholder expectations. This requires the

ability to offer innovative solutions to operational problems, with faculty members actively reconfiguring and transforming their practices to suit the challenges that face them. However, reconfigurations may not always be possible, and expectations may not always be meet or exceeded.

Figure 3 enables researchers to postulate and evaluate the relationships between a series of factors: the subject (faculty member), artefacts (resources), rules (structures and systems), community groups, time and division of labour, in order to access what may be *blocking*, *limiting* or *enhancing* faculty member activities. For example, poor access to physical artefacts (resources), such as laboratory equipment, IT equipment or key text books, may make the delivery of UK programmes in China difficult between collaborating Sino and UK faculty members. To understand why this may be the case, figure 3 allows researchers to explore the relationship between other factors, such as community groups, division of labour, time, and rules, and encourages an exploration of these factors in relation to the influence they may be having on access to physical resources. Clearly a lack of access to artefacts (resources) required to generate an activity is problematic. Without access to key text books or laboratory equipment teaching and learning activities maybe limited or even rendered impossible overseas. However, it maybe that rules, policies or stakeholder groups (central government, municipalities, or parents) can exert a controlling influence over the educational partnership that may not be initially obvious to those investigating faculty member operational interactions. Moreover, faculty members themselves, may be unaware of underpinning forces that control their operational activities and outcomes. The aim of figure 3 is to assist researchers in identifying and examining a series of factors and the relationships between them, so that the operational phase can be understood in detail. This type

of investigation makes it possible to uncover where some of the challenges facing

faculty members operationalising TNE originate, and enable senior managers to

consider the relationships between a series of factors that could potentially be

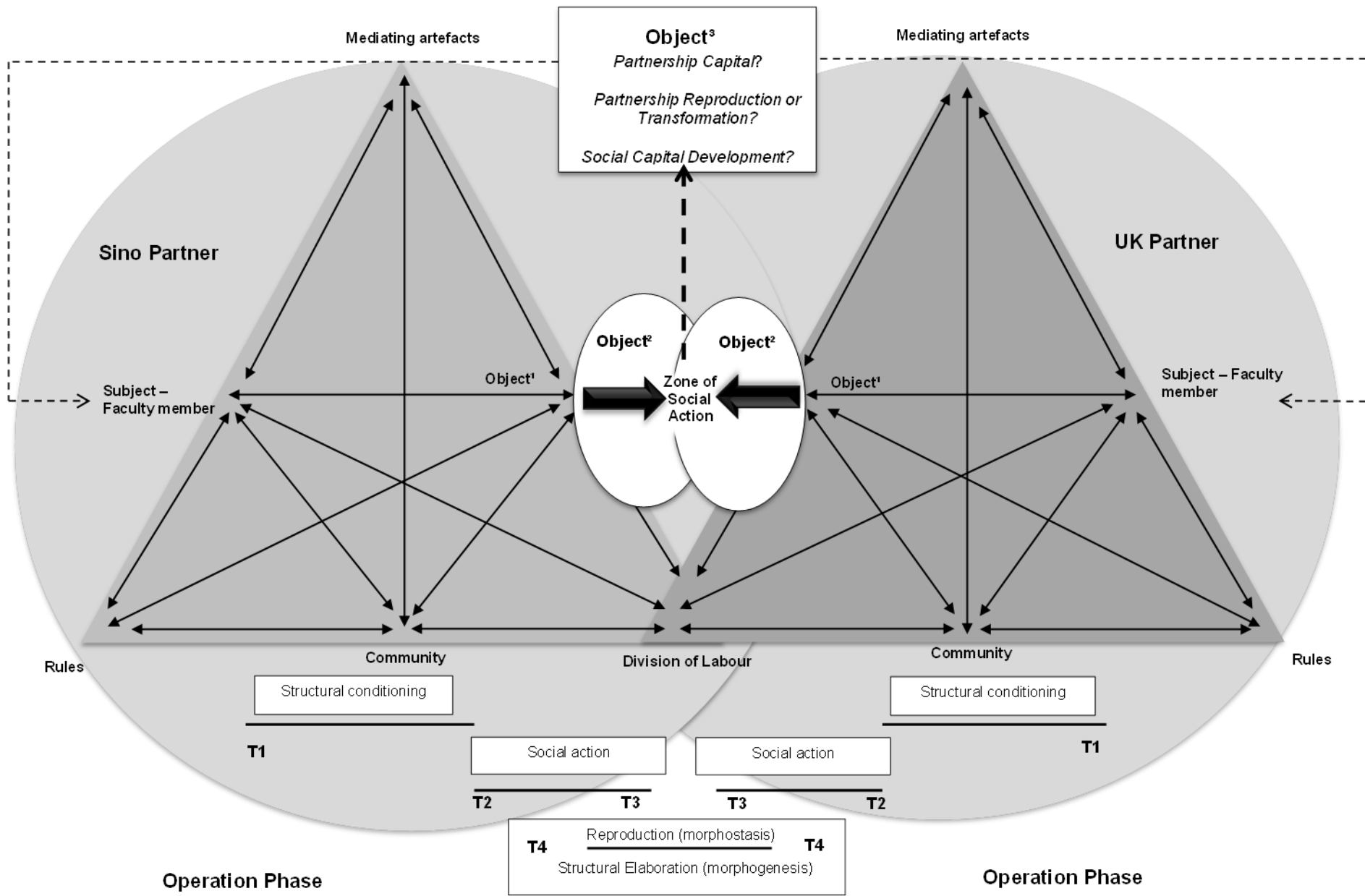modified to enhance faculty member interactions over time.

Figure 3: Operational level transnational partnership development: a fusion model (Adapted from Engeström, 2001, p. 13; Archer, 1995, p. 157, Weber, 1978)

Conclusion

The aim of this paper was to offer an alternative research approach in which to investigate the operational phase of TNE partnerships. For too long, TNE educational research has focused on the strategic initiation of overseas partnerships, or on the implementation of partnership for the sake of improving quality and pedagogical delivery. Whilst these discussions are critically important, further investigations into the operational phase of TNE can expand our knowledge of this rapidly growing phenomenon.

By considering the operational phase of TNE as an interacting, cross-boundary activity system, it becomes possible to identify, examine and evaluate relationships between a series of factors: activities, rules, stakeholders, resources, historicity and motive. By adding additional theories such as TMSA and social action, further variables become visible, such as time, reproduction, transformation, and the meaning of action. These dimensions can then be analysed in relation to the influencing effect they have on the subject (faculty member). TNE operational research can now focus on exploring how these variables affect operational faculty member interactions and outcomes. Moreover, these engagements and the outcomes of these interactions can be analysed in order to discover which variables seemingly have the greatest influencing factor on faculty behaviour over time.

Although pervious research is informative and engaging, there is an opportunity to advance theory in the area of TNE operations that relates specifically to faculty member practices, interpretations and responses. In addition, research findings could be utilised in order to develop HEI TNE partnership strategies and structures which could benefit faculty members in their operational tasks, thereby strengthening relations between international operational teams. This paper

recommends senior management engage with research that utilises this alternative approach to research so working environments and the needs of operational faculty members can be enhanced over time. Operational activities have the potential to transform, positively or negatively, international partnership relationships. Moreover, it is these social relations that underpin TNE programmes, creating implications for quality assurance, pedagogy and the overseas student experience of UK higher education.

References

Amey, M. J., Eddy, P.L., & Campbell, T.G,. (2010). Crossing boundaries: creating community college partnerships to promote educational transitions. *Community College Review,* 37(4), 333-347.

Archer , M. (1998) Realism and morphogenesis. In M. Archer, R. Bhaskar, A. Collier, T. Lawson & A. Norrie (Eds.), *Critical Realism: Essential Readings* (pp. 356-382). Abingdon: Routledge.

Archer, M. (2010). Morphogenesis versus structuration: on combining structure and action. *The British Journal of Sociology*, 61(s1), 225-252.

Arino, A., & de la Torre, J. (1998). Learning from failure: towards an evolutionary model of collaborative ventures. *Organization Science,* 9(3), 306-325.

Austin, J. E. (2000). *The Collaboration Challenge: How Nonprofits and Businesses Succeed Through Strategic Alliances*. San Francisco: Jossey-Bass Publishers.

Ayoubi, R. M., & Al-Habaibeh, A. (2006). An investigation into international business collaboration in higher education organisations: a case study of international partnerships in four leading universities. *International Journal of Educational Management,* 20(5), 380-396.

Bell, M., Smith, L. & Vrazalic, L. (2008). International outcomes through groupwork in transnational higher education. In L. Dunn, & M. Wallace (Eds), *Teaching in Transnational Higher Education: Enhancing Learning for Offshore International Students* (pp.148-159). Abingdon: Routledge.

Bennell, P., & Pearce, T. (2002). The internationalisation of higher education: exporting education to developing and transitional economies. *International Journal of Educational Development,* 23(2), 215-232.

Bolton, D., & Nie, R. (2010). Creating value in transnational higher education: the role of stakeholder management. *Academy of Management Learning and Education,* 9(4), 701-714.

British Council. (2013). *The Shape of Things to Come: The Evolution of Transnational Education: Data, Definitions, Opportunities and Impacts Analysis 2013*. Retrieved 26th August, 2015, from http://www.britishcouncil.org/sites/britishcouncil.uk2/files/the_shape_of_things_to_come_2.pdf.

Brookes, M., & Becket, N. (2011). Developing global perspectives through international management degrees. *Journal of Studies in International Education,* 15(4), 374-394.

Chan, W. W. Y. (2004). International cooperation in higher education: theory and practice.

Journal of Studies in International Education, 8(1), 32-55.

Daniels, H., Edwards, A., Engeström, Y., Gallagher, T., & Ludvigsen, S. (2010). *Activity Theory in Practice: Promoting Learning across Boundaries and Agencies.* Abingdon: Routledge.

Debowski, S. (2008). Risky business: effective planning and management of transnational teaching. In L. Dunn, & M. Wallace (Eds), *Teaching in Transnational Higher Education: Enhancing Learning for Offshore International Students* (pp. 204-215). Abingdon: Routledge.

Dhillon, J. K. (2015). Social capital in inter-organisational partnership research. In Y. Li (Ed.), *Handbook of Research Methods and Applications in Social Capital* (pp. 307-323). Cheltenham: Edward Elgar.

Dunn, L., & Wallace, M. (2006). Australian academics and transnational teaching: an exploratory study of their preparedness and experiences. *Higher Education Research and Development,* 25(4), 357-369.

Engeström, Y. (2001). Expansive learning at work: towards an activity theoretical reconceptualisation. *Journal of Education and Work,* 14(1), 133-157.

Engeström, Y. (2005). Knotworking to create collaborative intentionality capital in fluid organisational fields. In M. M. Beyerlein, S. T. Beyerlein & F. A. Kennedy (Eds.), *Creating Collaborative Capital: Creating Intangible Value* (Vol. 11, pp. 307- 336). Bingley: Emerald Group Publishing Limited.

Fielden, J. (2008). *The Practice of Internationalisation: Managing International Activities in UK Universities* (Research Series/1). London: UK Higher Education International Unit.

Gray, B. (1989). *Collaborating: Finding Common Ground for Multi-party Problems.* San Francisco: Jossey-Bass.

Gribble, K., & Ziguras, C. (2003). Learning to teach offshore: pre-departure training for lecturers in transnational programs. *Higher Education Research & Development,* 22(2), 205-216.

Healey, N., & Bordogna, C. (2014). From transnational to multinational education: emerging trends in international higher education. *Internationalisation of Higher Education* 3, 33-56.

Heffernan, T., &. Poole, D. (2004). "Catch me I'm falling": key factors in the deterioration of offshore educational partnerships. *Journal of Higher Education Policy and Management,* 26(1), 75-90.

Heffernan, T., & Poole, D. (2005). In search of "the vibe": Creating effective international education partnerships*. Higher Education,* 50(2), 223-245.

Helms, R. M. (2015). *International Higher Education Partnerships: A Global Review of Standards and Practices.* Washington D.C: American Council on Education (ACE).

HESA. (n.d). *Students studying wholly overseas.* Retrieved 18th August, 2015, from https://www.hesa.ac.uk/pr199

Huxham, C., & Vangen, S. (2000). Ambiguity, compelxity and dynamics in membership of collaboration. *Human Relations,* 53(6), 771-806.

Keay, J., May, H., & O'Mahony, J. (2014). Improving learning and teaching in transnational education: can communities of practice help? *Journal of Education for Teaching,* 40(3), 251-266.

Keevers, L., Lefoe, G., Leask, B., Darwood Sultan, F.K.P., Ganesharatnam, S., Loh, V., & Yin Lim, J.S. (2014). 'I like the people I work with. Maybe I'll get to meet them in person one day': teaching and learning practice development with transnational teaching teams. *Journal of Education for Teaching,* 40(3), 232-250.

Knight, J. (2004). Internationalisation remodeled: definition, approaches and rationales. *Journal of Studies in International Education*, 8(1), 5-31.

Knight, J. (2015). International Universities: misunderstandings and emerging models. *Journal of Studies in International Education*, 19(2), 107-121.

Leask, B. (2008). Teaching for learning in the transnational classroom. In L. Dunn, & M. Wallace (Eds), *Teaching in Transnational Higher Education*, (pp. 120-132). Abingdon: Routledge.

Molm, L. D., Whitham, M.M., & Melamed, D. (2012). Forms of exchange and integrative bonds: effects of history and embeddedness. *American Sociological Review,* 77(1), 141-165.

Naidoo, V.(2009). Transnational higher education: a stock take of current activity. *Journal of Studies in International Education,* 13(3), 310-330.

Paul, R. (1990). *Open Learning and Open Management*. London: Kogan Page.

QAA. (2010). *Code of Practice for the Assurance of Academic Quality and Standards in Higher Education. Collaborative Provision and Flexible and Distributed Learning* Gloucester: QAA

Roth, W. M. (2007). Emotion at work: a contribution to third-generation cultural-historical activity theory. *Mind, Culture and Activity,* 14(1-2), 40-63.

Smith, K. (2010). Assuring quality in transnational higher education: a matter of collaboration or control? *Studies in Higher Education,* 35(7), 793-806.

Taylor, J. (2016) Understanding international partnerships: a theoretical and practical approach. *Perspectives: Policy and Practice in Higher Education*, 20(2-3), 44-50.

UNESCO and the Council of Europe. (2002). *Code of Good Practice in the Provision of Transnational Education.* Retrieved 28th Sept, 2012, from http://www.coe.int/t/dg4/highereducation/recognition/Code%20of%20good%20practice_EN.asp

Vygotsky, L. S. (1989) Concrete human psychology. *Soviet Psychology* 27, 53-77.

Walton, J.S., Guarisci, G. (2007) Structural issues and knowledge management in transnational education partnerships. *Journal of European Industrial Training*, 31(5), 358-376.

Weber, M. (1978). The nature of social action. In W. G. Runciman (translator), *Weber: Selections in Translation*, (pp. 7-32). Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

Wohlstetter, P., Smith, J. & Malloy, C.L. (2005). Strategic alliances in action: towards a theory of evolution. *The Policy Studies Journal* 33(3), 419- 442.

Tables and Figures for Article

Table 1: HESA 'Students in Higher Education 2013/14 & 2012/13' Table O

Type of Provision- Outside of European Union	Total Number of students 2013-14	Total Number of students 2012-13
Overseas campus of reporting HE provider	18,555	16,780
Distance, flexible or distributed learning	96,550	98,375
Other arrangement including collaborative provision	100,825	89,800
Subtotal - students registered at a UK HE provider	215,930	204,960
Overseas partner organisation	339,770	315,745
Other arrangement	5,805	540
Subtotal - students studying for an award of a UK HEI (not registered)	345,575	316,285
Total	**561,505**	**521,245**

Figure 1: Third generation cultural historical activity theory (Engeström 2001, p. 136).
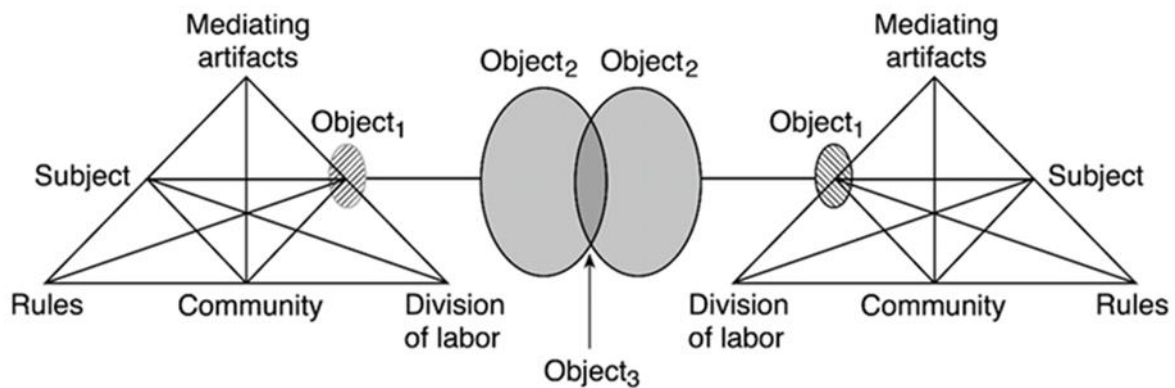
Figure 2: Superimposing the transformational model of social action and the morphogenetic/ static cycle (Archer, 1998, p. 376)