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Kinship and Collegiality: An exploration of the underpinning characteristics of external partnerships at a University Education Department.

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Introduction and context

Partnership is vital to university education departments in England as education policy evolves, and all sectors become increasingly marketised. Government policy has changed the dynamic of educational partnerships between schools and universities significantly over the past 20 years. This study investigated the perspective of external partners and university education department staff with regard to the key factors which enable or constrain external partnerships, whilst also documenting some of the policy changes which have occurred.

Teacher education, both pre- and in- service, has undergone seismic changes in England over recent years. The details of these policy changes have been well documented elsewhere (e.g. Jackson and Burch, 2016; Lucas and Crowther, 2016; DfE, 2010; Wolf, 2011), but what is useful to note is the impact on professional relationships within the teacher education sector as a whole and the broadening of the sector to bring enhanced engagement from schools themselves. Though schools have always played a significant role in the initial training of teachers, the agenda has previously very much been driven by university education departments, with schools playing a vital, but secondary role through the hosting of placements. In 2009, 78.7% trainees were trained through HEI routes, with 16.7% and 5.6% through employment based and School Centred Initial Teacher Training (SCITT) respectively (Whitty, 2014). With the introduction of a revised inspection framework (Ofsted 2014, 2015), the focus was squarely placed upon the 'partnership', in other words both the initial teacher education (ITE) provider and schools working more strategically together. The White Paper, 'The Importance of Teaching' (DfE, 2010), set out Government intention of repositioning schools to the forefront of ITE, with the then Secretary of State for Education stating that 'We will provide more opportunities for a

larger proportion of trainees to learn on the job by improving and expanding the best of the current school-based routes into teaching' (para 2.21). By 2016, this policy had led to a rapid change in the landscape of ITE provision, with a 39%/61% split between HEI and school led places respectively (DfE, 2016). New partnerships between HEIs and schools have subsequently emerged, sharing both the tuition fee and training, with the ultimate accountability to either Ofsted or the university for student outcomes remaining with each university's education department (Jackson and Burch, 2016). The national expansion of SCITTs also threatened to undermine universities' role in initial teacher education. However, many SCITTs have sought to provide their students with the widely recognised academic award for teachers, the Post Graduate Certificate in Education (PGCE), resulting in links with university education departments being maintained and, in some cases, newly brokered.

In addition to the evolving ITE landscape, continuing professional development (CPD) for teachers has also seen major changes in terms of access and provision. Before the introduction of Teaching Schools in 2011, and their subsequent expansion, CPD was seen as sitting squarely with individual schools through whole school 'INSET' (IN-SERVICE Training Day), days, access to local authorities' offer, or a university's education department. The latter often provided award bearing CPD, funded either locally or through Government initiatives enabling in-service teachers to gain access to university post-graduate opportunities via master's level study. The notion of teaching being more widely a masters' profession has come in and out of political fashion, with scholarships being offered intermittently depending on Government policy, to support initiatives such as the Post Graduate Professional Development programme (PPD) or the Masters' in Teaching and Learning (MTL). In time, these ran alongside other funded courses, namely the Government's National Strategies' Maths Specialist Teacher Masters' Programme (Walker et al, 2013) and Every Child a Reader (ECaR) Teacher Leaders' Masters' (Tanner et al 2011). The 2010 White Paper, however, saw these come to an end, replaced by small scale funding for serving teachers as part of a National Scholarship Fund, enabling access to

Master's level study. This scheme ended after 4 years. As it now stands, there is no Government scheme in the UK to fund masters' study for serving teachers.

At the same time, the introduction of teaching schools and the fragmentation of the role of local education authorities has seen a rise in non-accredited CPD being marketed and delivered by networks of schools and private consultancy firms. The drive for every school to be part of an explicit network of schools, whether that be teaching school alliances, federations, learning trusts or multi academy trusts within a self-improving school system, has created significant new 'family cluster' of schools (Hargreaves, 2010). These clusters have systematically increased their engagement with initial teacher education, bidding directly to NCTL for teacher training places. As previously mentioned, this has enabled a huge shift towards schools leading initial teacher education, working in strategic partnerships with HEIs or SCITTs. However, without Government funded initiatives, the desire of these clusters of schools to engage with university led CPD or accredited courses has been much less systematic.

Whilst the picture at home for HEI education departments is one of challenge, change and new relationships, overseas there are significant opportunities for growth. Against the backdrop of English Government policy in teacher education, universities themselves are repositioning themselves in an increasingly marketised environment. Despite relatively poor PISA scores (OECD, 2016), with world rankings of 23rd for reading and 26th for maths, the English education system remains one which is looked to from many other countries, with UK Universities being seen in the vanguard of educational pedagogy and creative thinking. Set against the backdrop of the dynamic nature of a university's role in teacher education, the need to build and maintain robust partnerships within teacher education seems more vital than ever if university education departments are to be viable contributors within the new and shifting landscape.

Methodology

The University in which the research took place has a long history of engagement with a wide range of ITE and CPD activities. Their portfolio includes undergraduate and post graduate ITE across the early years, primary, secondary and post 16 phases in a range of delivery formats and partnership approaches (for example HEI-based, SCITT, School-based) as well as accredited and non-accredited CPD across subject, curriculum development and leadership and management for the domestic and international markets. In order to explore the nature of these partnerships further a qualitative approach was essential as the focus was in the motives and perspectives of our partners, our colleagues and the university as a corporate entity. To this end, questionnaires were designed for use with a broad range of teacher education partners. Semi-structured interviews were also conducted with university based colleagues involved in a range of these partnership activities.

The questionnaires were constructed and administered using survey monkey. Documented advantages of the use of such services including ease of anonymization, making research much faster, particularly the ability to reach large numbers of geographically dispersed participants, people's familiarity with the format and ease with internet use as well as the ability of such tools to analyse and present quantitative results in a range of formats (Wright 2005). We were also influenced by the assertion of Llieva, Baron, & Healey (2002) that online surveys may also save time by allowing researchers to collect data while they work on other tasks. When constructing the questionnaires, it was important to include mostly open questions enabling the participants to answer in their own words, uninfluenced by any specific alternatives presented to them. This was essential, as we wanted partners to reveal their rationale for working in partnership with the university as well as their perceptions of any enabling or constraining factors in the relationship

The semi-structured interviews with university staff followed the same format with biographical questions to establish which aspects of partnership they were involved in and open ended questions focussing on the factors which enable and constrain partnership working. Within the current neoliberal context, an understanding of the corporate view of partnership working and its value was

seen as essential. This was established through a documentary analysis of the university's strategic development documentation.

The questionnaires yielded a response rate of 8 out of 24 and thus the sample size reflected in this instance was eight questionnaire returns from partners coupled with four semi-structured interviews with members of staff.

The participants to the questionnaires were 4 from international Erasmus partners (with pseudonyms Eva, Bridget, Olga and Anna), 2 from SCITT partners (with pseudonyms Hannah and Alice), 1 local CPD partner (pseudonym Nick) and 1 international CPD (pseudonym Junxia).

The 4 university staff interviewed were involved in CPD partnership (pseudonym Steve), in ITE partnership (pseudonym Jane), international partnership (pseudonym Carol) and School Direct partnership (pseudonym Andrea).

Approach to analysis:

Using discourse analysis as our chosen approach offered us not only a systematic approach to the data analysis but also the opportunity to examine the relationships between the discursive and linguistic features of the data samples and the wider social relationships and processes that they revealed (Taylor 2004). The ways in which individuals and organisations use language is not neutral, and it is always positioned within a formal or informal set of social practices. Likewise, the way in which language reflects the world and the identities and social relationships within it is not neutral either. Rather these linguistic practices reflect the choices made by individuals when describing social objects and these choices in turn shed light on the implications for things like status, solidarity, distribution of social goods and power (Gee 2011). In this way we began to see 'partnership' as a social object and explored the implications of the way it was expressed by participants in the research.

Findings

The perspective of ITE partners listed a number of factors which they saw as key to partnership. These included the academic facets of high standards, real content, research and knowledge and understanding of current practice. However, what became apparent was that although these factors were important the overriding key to partnership lay in the 'softer skills' represented by the University. These included regular communication, consistent with earlier findings by Powell (1996) and Bell et al (2006), as well as tailor-made answers to questions, enthusiasm, mutual respect and the importance of the individual link person. This was supported by comments such as *'we have never been made to feel that we are less than but that our skills and expertise are of great value'* by Alice and *'strong relationship between key personnel, prepared to give and take'* stated by Hannah. The perspective of CPD partners was consistent with those from ITE partners. Once again the importance of academic factors did feature i.e. research driven, cutting edge educational change, good quality of teaching and accredited learning programmes. These findings are consistent with earlier research undertaken by Menzies and Jordan-Daus (2012). However, of key importance were the softer skills such as, for example, high quality dialogue and communications, sharing of good ideas and accepting of critical friends which aligned with the work of Schon (1983,1987) and Bell et al (2006). The importance of the link person became very clear and this was supported by phrases including *'trust each other'* stated by Junxia and *'loyalty'* as mentioned by Nick, that were used when describing the partnership, which is consistent with research by Powell (1996) and Hudson et al (1999).

The perspective of international partners reflected the home based partners. Academic input such as teaching was highlighted as being of good quality and very professional. Once again interpersonal skills, supporting each other, mutual benefits, learning from each other and the individual link person were the key ingredients that created and sustained the partnership with all participants using phrases such as *'personal involvement'* as stated by Anna and *'real contact'* reported by Olga. Interestingly, Junxia, the international CPD partner, used the phrase *'first class service'* in her responses which was the only 'business like' phrase alluding to the partnership providing a service. As a response from an

international partner whose first language was not English, this response might have reflected the complexities associated with communication in a second language. However, it might also have been interpreted as implying that the participant valued this aspect of the partnership, perceiving it in terms of a business transaction rather than in terms of the relationship.

In terms of the relative value of different aspects of the relationship, participants were asked to identify whether they perceived the university, the department, or the link individual as being most important to their relationship with the university. Five participants identified the individual link and three the education department: however, none identified the University itself as being of the greatest importance, illustrating the importance of micro rather than macro aspects of the relationship: that is, rapport and relationship rather than institutional status and reputation. Whilst our study was limited, the considerable value placed by participants on the personal relationship with the link individual is illustrative of the importance of those individuals to business generation and development, and by extension, raises potential issues in terms of, for example, succession planning and staff capacity.

The university participants were also asked their views about partnership. All highlighted what they perceived to be the importance of partnership and the value of working with partners. However, in terms support from the wider university, their responses were less positive. These key staff involved in external partnerships appeared to view the university as a barrier. For example, responses suggested that partnerships were *'fundamental to my role but not sure if relevant to the university'* (Jane) whilst Steve stated that the *'wider university does not value reciprocation which may not have financial value'*. Such comments imply that the participants feel that the university fails to appreciate the value of their partnership working in terms of its reputational value to the institution. Similarly, they were critical of the support provided by the institution with Jane commenting that *'(you) do admin yourself, there is a systemic amnesia to straight forward procedures'* and Steve that *'other parts of the university can cause problems for the partnership'*.

Although dealing with different aspects of external partnership (including ITE, CPD, and International work) all members of university staff interviewed expressed the feeling that the university did not value what they deemed critical work which enhanced the university's reputation. These perceptions are consistent with Burt's (2004) discussion of 'Boundary Spanners'-individuals who make things work for an institution which fails to acknowledge the time and energy these processes require.

Discussion

The findings of this study have a number of implications for external partnerships in HE contexts. In terms of constraints it does appear that wider university systems and perspectives can constrain, rather than enable partnerships. The university staff were very clear about their perception that a lack of support and infrastructure inhibited partnership. Interestingly, partners only tended to report problems with the university when they faced problems that their link person or department could not control, such as, for example, with finance and admissions. This raises questions about the extent to which the ability of the link person to resolve most difficulties led external partners to perceive departmental staff as being more significant in their relationship than the wider university.

The main enablers of partnership seem to be the desire of individuals from both organisations to work together for the overall good (Huxham and Vangen, 2005). The realisation that impact can be far greater when individuals work together seems to be a key driver. University staff and external partners agreed both organisations benefited from collaboration, consistent with the theme of mutual benefit described by Podolny (2001) and the findings of Huxham and Vangen (2005) that partnership is more likely to be a successful one if there is a form of collaborative advantage.

Educational reputation and equal relationship are also enablers. Despite reporting significant perceived organisational constraints, university staff's responses are indicative of an ability to '*get the job done*' as stated by Carol and to establish and sustain positive and productive relationships, indicative of the autonomous professionalism described by Tummons (2014, see also Atkins and

Tummons, 2017) which university staff employ to make things happen for the 'common good' (Hadfield and Jopling, 2012).

It appears that the partners rate the link person most highly as they are the 'boundary spanner' (Burt, 2004), enabling and ensuring a smooth operating and productive partnership. The trust that partners have in this person seems to act as a main enabler of collaboration, consistent with arguments by Coleman (2011). That is, the partners trust that irrespective of any problems that may arise, the 'boundary spanner' will resolve them and keep the partnership functioning. This would seem to suggest that the reputational aspects of the wider institution are less important to collaborators than the personal relationships they establish with individual staff members who effectively become the 'face' of the institution.

It also raises questions about why the key factors from the partner perspective tend to focus on the interpersonal, communication and softer skills, suggesting that the rapport, relationship building and sense of common purpose develop a form of intellectual kinship (Roberts, 2015, see also Hart 1988) between partners. Such relationships take time to develop, and may be seen to reflect a move from collaborative relationships to collegial relationships. Thus, the importance attributed to the link person by the external participants would suggest that both collegiality and intellectual kinship may be crucial ingredients that help partners respond effectively to the inevitable challenges arising in international relationships.

If, as the responses from external partners suggest, the individual rather than the university is the key to partnership then this implies that risk factors for the university are high. If the individual is seen as the 'face' of the institution, and the business transaction is predicated on that relationship, what happens if that key member of university staff moves on or is unable to work? Such a situation has significant implications for collaborations which rely heavily on personal relationships between individuals, but which, in many cases, are also associated with significant financial turnover. This

suggests that, in order to sustain relationships with partners, succession planning should be a key concern of institutions who are embracing greater degrees of collaboration – and the financial benefits these accrue in response to the increasingly marketised state of the HE sector in the UK and beyond.

Conclusion

Although the wider education department and its reputation play a part in the relationship with a partner it does appear that the key relationship is that with the individual link person at the university.

The institutional reputation on its own does not appear to be the main driver for partnership and as such the partner bases their decisions and judgements upon the relationship and discussions with the link person they deal with. In turn those key actors in the university education department also see the wider university as an inhibitor and constraint upon partnership, but maintain their relationships by drawing on autonomous forms of professionalism (Tummons, 2014; Atkins and Tummons, 2017), see also Powell, 1996; Burt, 2004) and collegiality.

Such professionalism appears to involve 'softer skills', such as integrity, warmth, and reciprocity which inform each partner's judgement and decision making in the university partnership context (Bell et al, 2006). Thus, intellectual kinship, collegiality, and common goals may be argued as key to generating successful external relationships. Even if challenges with, for example, university administrative systems threaten to undermine the relationship this can be overcome by the personal relationship, encompassing mutual respect and trust established between the partner and the individual representing the university. The 'Janus' role and boundary spanning skills of this link person are thus pivotal to partnership success. Despite the small scale of this study, it is significant that these core findings were common across all partners: those involved in the delivery of ITE, CPD, and international programmes.

This study also indicates that if all needs align i.e. wider university, education department and provider then this would ensure the smoothest and most enabled partnership (Huxham and Vangen, 2005).

However, it also suggests the body out of step is more likely to be the wider university rather than the department seeking partnership or the link person or the partner. These issues have significant implications for universities who increasingly rely on partnerships to diversify income streams and place students.

Implications for Institutions

This study highlights the significance of effective communication between the department establishing the partnership and those responsible for broader managerial and administrative systems in the institution, as well as the potential importance of shared values across departments in respect of supporting and maintaining international partnerships.

Further, institutions should recognise the fundamental importance of the link person, in terms of the boundary-spanning nature of the role, the importance to that role of intellectual kinship and the potential this has for the the development of new or expanded relationships. Finally, it is important to note that a business relationship which relies on an individual is fragile: people move, become ill and change roles. Clear strategies are essential for succession planning across all such partnerships in an institution, if they are to avoid the potential financial and reputational repercussions arising from unplanned change.

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