

## **Advocating and administering Critical Realism in a study of Transnational Educational Collaborative Partnerships**

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### **Abstract**

Transnational higher education is an increasingly important and essential part of the internationalisation of higher education. As the number of global educational institutions and international students participating in these types of initiatives increases, it becomes of paramount importance that research methodologies that investigate the phenomenon are developed and shared within transnational research communities. This paper seeks to contribute to transnational education research by exploring a paradigm which has the potential to generate alternative forms of knowledge concerning transnational collaborative partnerships. By exploring functionalist and interpretivist approaches, often applied in partnership research, this paper argues that neither approach, when applied in isolation, can fully articulate the notion of a TNE collaborative partnership. The paper therefore champions the application of critical realism when investigating these partnerships and provides an empirical example of two Chinese-British case studies to illustrate the application of the paradigm, followed by a vignette of the type of findings generated, and its value to research and practice.

### **Keywords**

Critical realism, internationalisation, transnational education collaborative partnerships, sociological paradigms, research design.

### **Introduction**

Research into the internationalisation of higher education (HE) is not a new phenomenon. Over the years, academics have tried to analyse internationalisation and explore its effects on HE strategies and practices (Henry, Lingard, Rizvi, & Taylor, 1999). 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. These policy moves have enhanced the space for international co-operation and competition in HE, with universities and colleges now encouraged to develop world-wide initiatives to meet the challenges of new open information environments. Internationalisation strategies in contemporary HE range in form and content, and can include collaborative research, transnational education, staff and student mobility programmes and student recruitment. This paper seeks to explore one type of

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internationalisation strategy adopted by certain higher education institutions (HEIs): transnational higher education (TNE).

Over the past 30 years, TNE has gained in popularity, enabling HEIs from across the globe to promote their HE services to overseas markets. The definition of TNE, widely accepted and used in research is:

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 (UNESCO/ Council of Europe, 2002).

What is evident from the above definition, is that the process of establishing cross- border educational provision is complex, and is influenced by a myriad of international, national, sectorial and institutional factors (Knight, 2005). Clearly, there are different forms of TNE that HEIs may choose to develop, including distance learning, franchise, validation and branch campus operations (Healey & Michael, 2015). However, this paper is specifically interested in exploring arrangements that are delivered in conjunction with an overseas partner; the UK Higher Education Statistics Agency categorises these types of arrangements as either ‘collaborative provision, consortia or joint award programmes’ (HESA, n.d). The UK Quality Assurance Agency further extends this list to include other forms of TNE provision such as validation, franchise, articulation, joint programmes, dual/double degrees, research degree provision and workplace learning (QAA, 2010). All these forms of TNE activities are therefore considered to reflect collaborative characteristics and methods of working. Yet what do we really know about the nature of collaborative partnerships, and how is it best to research them? The answer to this question has implications for academics who wish to investigate these types of arrangements.

Existing TNE literature often discusses the intricacies of working overseas (Feast & Bretag, 2005; Smith, L., 2009), the types of partnerships in operation (Healey & Mitchell, 2015), or the TNE landscape (Caruana & Montgomery, 2015). Moreover, certain studies utilise TNE collaborative partnerships as a context in which to explore other phenomena, such as pedagogy (Hoare, 2013), staff development (Gribble & Ziguas, 2003), or quality assurance (Smith, K., 2010). However, very few studies explore the essential features of a TNE collaborative partnership, or explore what influences them and their development over time.

Although those who have investigated international partnerships (as opposed to TNE specifically), have contributed to enhancing our understandings of what affects and enhances cross-border partnerships (Heffernan & Poole, 2004, 2005), the aim of this paper is to further develop academic comprehension of TNE collaborative partnerships. It postulates:

1. What do researchers, interested in researching a collaborative partnership need to know about the concept and its essential attributes?
2. How can this information be used to inform philosophical and methodological approaches to research, so credible conclusions can be drawn?

It is hoped, by enhancing the design and analytical potential of research, greater knowledge regarding the phenomenon can be shared, thereby improving institutional responses to TNE partnership management.

Currently, researchers involved in investigating TNE arrangements, often gravitate towards two popular, but very different sociological paradigms, functionalism or interpretivism. From an initial analysis of organisational literature focused specifically on *partnership* research (Hord, 1986; Gray, 1989; Child & Faulkner, 1998; Sorenson, Folker & Brigham, 2008), it becomes apparent how each paradigm posits the term, and the methodologies used to elicit data. By investigating *partnership* through a certain philosophical lens, common sets of features that emphasise the commonality of that particular perspective on the subject of investigation, become apparent. This makes it possible to first, identify the frequency of both paradigms in existing TNE partnership research, and secondly, explore the implications this has on knowledge generation regarding the phenomenon.

However, it is acknowledged herein, that certain studies may adopt specific research paradigms to satisfy the knowledge requirements of specific audiences, so claims or recommendations can be made. For example, a functionalist, quantitative approach may be used to generate data to support decision-making about the value of a TNE collaborative partnership as a commercial endeavour. Interpretivism may be used to evidence the more nuanced and subjective side of offshore arrangements, so to improve operational practices. Yet, after an analysis of the term *collaborative partnership*, what becomes apparent is that neither paradigm, when applied in isolation from the other, fully appreciates both the structural and subjective elements required to produce a *collaborative partnership*.

This paper therefore aims to guide researchers towards an alternative paradigm through which to scrutinize TNE collaborative partnerships: critical realism. To evidence the value of this paradigm, this paper starts by briefly examining the nature and attributes of a *collaborative partnership*. It continues by identifying the key features of both the

functionalist and interpretivist paradigms, whereby it becomes possible to classify existing TNE collaborative partnership studies based on their inclinations, styles and research designs.

These two paradigms are frequently applied when investigating TNE partnerships, such as strategic development or initiation, or in other associated partnership activities, such as pedagogy, staff development or quality (Smith K., 2010, 2012). Furthermore, by exploring the two paradigms, the reader is provided with insights into the limitation of each paradigm, thereby evidencing *why* critical realism is a valuable tool when seeking to investigate TNE collaborative arrangements. Finally, an empirical example of two Chinese-British case studies is presented. This illustrates the application of critical realism in practice. This is followed by a vignette of the type of findings that can be extracted and evaluated when using this paradigm, and how they can be used to inform managerial and operational processes.

### **The nature and attributes of a *collaborative partnership***

To achieve collaboration, organisations must seek to develop integrative bonds, which are achieved through the continuous acts of conscious effort made by each partner. Collaborative partnerships are therefore not just systematic, static and functional, they are dynamic organisms whose construction and management is sensitive to both macro and micro level environmental changes (Eddy, 2010; Das & Teng 1998). Furthermore, they are progressed over time by agents, who engage in purposive and mutually beneficial activities, within the confines of a partnership structure (Gray, 1989).

In terms of power relations, collaboration seeks to produce democracy and equity between its members, with no member placed higher in rank than the other (Eddy, 2010). The term collaboration aims to develop a “we” process model of “joint force” (Hord, 1986, p. 24). Over time, shared norms are created among partners that form as a result of “negotiation, time together to build trust, and shared knowledge and meaning for ideas and visions regarding the joint venture” (Eddy, 2010, p. 50). Therefore, to understand what it means to collaborate, researchers must explore how agents develop and strengthen these key attributes.

However, since “structural patterning is inextricably grounded in practical interaction” (Archer, 2010, p. 226), it seems structure is able to influence the behaviour and actions of agents. Yet, structure can only be reproduced and transformed through individual agency, whereby individuals are confronted by a social structure which constrains their actions but does not determine them (Bhaskar, 1979; Ackroyd & Fleetwood, 2000). This suggests researchers seeking to investigate collaborative partnerships need to acknowledge the importance of both structure and agency, and the effect they have on one another.

When investigating structure and functionality in organisational settings, the most dominant paradigm is *functionalism*, whereby all aspects of society, or an organisation, serve a function that is necessary for the survival of that entity. In partnership literature, functionalism is used to investigate and analyse function and regulation, categorised by a concern for objectivity and providing explanations of the status quo, social order and consensus. It further seeks to produce knowledge which can be used to solve problem and provide practical solutions, with structuring playing a critical part in the formulating of appropriate systems and frameworks which support problem-solving activities (Burrell & Morgan, 1979).

Certainly, the functionalist paradigm is useful for explaining the purpose and benefits of TNE collaborative partnerships (Hill, Cheong, Leong & Fernandez- Chung, 2013), particularly where quantitative data matters in decision making-processes. Many studies evidence the way these alliances function and contribute to their organisation's development and survival, whether that be in the form of knowledge, community resilience (Collins, 2011), revenue, and/or cross-cultural development (Austin & Foxcroft, 2011). Furthermore, research which specifically focuses on the initiation phase of a partnership, often posit partnerships as strategic tools, used by HEIs to address issues of economic growth (Doorbar & Bateman, 2008), or competitive advantage (Ziguras & McBurnie, 2008). Other literary sources discuss the structures and systems required for the establishment of partnerships and the rationale behind such decisions (Zhuang, 2009; Taylor, 2016), organisational cultures and stakeholder engagement (Bolton & Nie, 2010), or the structural and regulatory issues in the management of TNE collaborative partnerships (Hodson & Thomas, 2001). These all serve to highlight the functionalist narrative embedded in TNE collaborative partnership research. This narrative aligns this research with *functionality*, *strategic intent* and *control*, and comes from a standpoint which tends to be positivist, quantitative and nomothetic. Moreover, its orientation towards structural considerations means it often ignores the emergent nature of social organisation (Burrell & Morgan, 1979).

Whilst functionalism enables researchers to appreciate the important strategic, structural, systematic and functional nature of collaborative partnerships; the paradigm fails to appreciate the human side of the enterprise. As Gray (1989) previously implied, collaboration requires an appreciation of the experiences of agents, whereby their interactions and interpretations matter to the evolution of the collaborative venture. It seems therefore, functionalism does not do enough to explain these essential collaborative features and their production.

In contrast to functionalism, *interpretivism* emphasises subjectivity, promulgating a concern for the subjective experience of individuals. Scholars who favour interpretivist approaches, often utilise TNE collaborative partnerships to study operational issues, emphasising the importance of agency in understanding their roles in relation to quality assurance (Hodson & Thomas, 2001), pedagogy, or professional development (Smith K., 2012; Jais, Smyrnios & Hoare, 2015). Research has tended to focus on exploring the how and why of these specific dimensions, and their effects on international strategies, staff and student experiences. However, there are a handful of scholars who utilise the subjective experiences of those who operate offshore partnerships to try to understand the essential features of collaborative partnerships.

In their analysis of international educational partnerships, Heffernan and Poole (2005) suggest that although these ventures exist to produce beneficial outputs for their institutions, such as profit, recruitment, expansion and league table rankings, consideration must be given to how these outputs are delivered. Their qualitative study concluded that key to the development of a partnership are relationship-based factors such as commitment, communication and trust. Similarly, Austin and Foxcroft (2011) argue factors that contribute to a partnership's success include the desire to mutually learn, the role of an in-house partnership champion, and a commitment to flexibility and dynamism. A collaborative partnership is thus conceptualised as being an opportunity to learn and develop, whereby the authors reveal how international partnerships represent professional learning spaces for both practitioners and students (Shore and Groen, 2009; Taylor, 2016).

Empirical and conceptual studies, which utilise the interpretivist lens, offer unique insights into the subjective, behavioural and nuanced side of collaborative work, which functionalist paradigms overlook. Yet, in the context of TNE collaborative partnership research, the functionalist approach offers the quantitative and numerical narrative that senior leaders like to espouse when making strategic decisions. Archer (2010, p.225) argues that functionalism has therefore, 'virtually snuffed-out agency' in many fields, with the acting subject becoming increasingly lifeless and meaningless. However, as previous research indicates, the subjective is important in helping us to understand the *lived experience* of collaborating colleagues and why this is fundamental to partnership progression and success. Key collaborative qualities such as trust, respect, shared meanings and language can only be understood through an exploration of social experiences (Heffernan & Poole, 2005). Yet, whilst interpretative sociology may offer insight into agency, it seems it should not be

sovereign over structure when it comes to understanding how and why TNE collaborative partnerships initiate and develop over time.

### **The ontological and epistemological meanings that presuppose collaborative partnerships**

The exploration of a *collaborative partnership* outlined above clearly emphasises both the functional and social nature of the phenomena. Clearly, paradigmatically and methodologically, what is required is more than just the deductive methods of theory testing and prediction advocated by a functionalist tradition (Ackroyd & Fleetwood, 2000). By adopting a functionalist approach, task identification and measurement is possible, but questions surrounding the *lived experiences* of agents, and what can be learnt from this about the nature of social phenomenon, cannot be answered as easily.

Consequently, what is required, is an approach that appreciates the complexity of open social systems, whilst also recognising the “need to evaluate these systems ‘critically’” (Sayer, 1992, p. 5). Collaborative partnerships do not operate as closed systems, or represent atomistic events, with people conceived merely as “passive sensors of given facts” (Bhaskar, 2011 p. 51). On the contrary, agents actively engage in social activities, evolving their partnership’s structure over time. Although ontologically, interpretivism is concerned with understanding the essence of the everyday world (Burrell & Morgan, 1979), it is context bound and subjective, relying on multiple perspectives to establish knowledge about what it means to engage in collaborative partnership work. Moreover, a subjective paradigm fails to appreciate that these relationships, whilst involving agency, operate within a structural framework, which influences human conduct. Although the importance of the human agent in the creation of partner relations is clear, in that social life and processes require human agents to engage in action, these actions occur in the context of encountered structures. Actions therefore create tensions in the collaborative structure, ultimately acting as the driver for change overtime.

Although socially constructed, it is fair to argue that collaborative partnerships do represent *real* entities that exist *out there*. They are more than individual mental constructs. As Fleetwood (2005) explains “...an entity is said to be *real* if it has *causal efficacy*; has an *effect on behaviour*; *makes a difference*” (2005, p. 199, original emphasis). *Real* is often synonymous with material entities, yet anything which influences action and creates events has the potential to be *real* to those involved (Fleetwood, 2005). This implies collaborations

are *real*; they can affect the behaviour of agents (staff members, senior leaders, students, etc.) and cause events (e.g. partnership termination, programme developments) that transforms the partnership over time. TNE collaborative partnerships are therefore posited as *real* structures, which have emergent properties, and cannot be analysed purely by investigating individuals in isolation (Ryan, Tähtinen, Vanharanta & Mainela, 2012). Furthermore, partner relationships cannot be reduced to the properties of individuals alone, as this would exclude important configurations that exist between connected colleagues (Bhaskar, 1979).

These interpretations imply that neither the interpretivist nor functionalist paradigms, when applied in isolation, can fully recognise the essential features that make a TNE collaborative partnership possible. The actions of agents are ineluctably shaped by the partnership's structure, and this generates unintended consequences, which form the context of social action and subsequent actions therein. Consequently, these partnerships do not operate in isolation from the objective structure: structural design clearly influences partner interactions. Scholars who wish to study TNE collaborative partnerships thus require a paradigm that acknowledges the importance of both the subjective agent in relation to the objective structure, and vice versa. Hence, to study collaborative partnerships through one paradigmatic lens, in isolation from the other, arguably creates weakness when trying to define what creates and makes collaboration possible. Ergo, it requires a research paradigm that favours the role of both *structure* and *agency*.

Methodologically, a question arises: How can empirical data be collected that ensures both the subjective and objective dimensions of a collaborative arrangement are captured and analysed, in order to not only improve the advancement of future TNE collaborative partnership research, but also enhance practical managerial processes?

### **Advocating the use of critical realism: An alternative approach**

Critical realists believe this world is, in principle, *real* but impossible for humans to truly perceive objectively. Critical realism considers that the surface appearance of things is potentially misleading in explaining a phenomenon's true character. Ultimately, critical realists try to overcome the antagonism which exists between positivists and interpretivist viewpoints about reality and how it can be known. Critical realists argue that social reality does not operate as a closed system, whereby laws and constants can explain social action. Conversely, they also argue it is not simply a social construct. Whilst discourse is important and interpretation crucial, social reality exists in a realm beyond that expressed merely



through discourse. These understandings liberate critical realism, enabling it to seek the cause of events from ‘elsewhere in the ontological spectrum’ (Ackroyd & Fleetwood, 2000, p. 13).

At the heart of critical realism lies *explanation* (Sayer, 1992). In order to achieve this level of explanation, critical realism uses a *transcendental realist* ontology, whereby the researcher is able to look for explanations that lie beyond daily cognition and perceptions. Mole (2012) posits critical realism as being unique in its ability to claim deeper explanations of social life. It does this by penetrating behind the surface of lived experiences and perceptions, looking to understand the connections, which make social reality possible. Based upon the above exploration of the nature of collaborative partnerships, it seems logical to adopt a philosophical position that mobilises the subjective experience of agents so to explore the dynamic and changing nature of social structures. Critical realism utilises three exploratory domains (table 1). To understand how these domains work and add value to research focused on TNE collaborative partnerships, each domain is explained.

<b>Mechanism</b>			□
<b>Events</b>		□	□
<b>Experiences</b>	□	□	□

Table 1: The domains of critical realism (Bhaskar, 1979, p. 13)

### ***The domain of the ‘empirical’***

In the domain of the *empirical*, agents (TNE research participants), experience and perceive the social world. This in-turn generates lived experiences agents can recall and share through empirical research methods, such as interviews or focus groups. Things can be measured, evaluated and described (Mole, 2012). The domain of the *empirical* consequently provides the portal through which the researcher and the researched engage in dialogue. Therefore, it is fundamentally interpretivist in character. We cannot remove ourselves from the *empirical* domain, yet it can be harnessed, enabling access to the deeper domains of the *actual* and the *real* (Fleetwood, 2005).

Critical realists thus argue that the *empirical* domain is not enough *in itself* to provide an explanation of social reality. Moreover, the *empirical* domain does not just signify the beliefs and experiences of the (TNE) research participants. The domain also represents the researcher’s preconceptions, experiences and interpretations of the phenomena under

investigation (Ryan et al., 2012). Critical realists therefore, acknowledge that all insights are inevitably *fallible* (Easton, 2010; Ryan et al., 2012). In the context of TNE collaborative partnership research, participants should be encouraged to share their lived experiences in detail, enabling the researcher to collect as much information as possible about that individual's role, responsibilities, experiences and interpretations of collaborative work.

### ***The domain of the 'actual'***

The second domain, known as the *actual*, suggests events and actions create TNE participant lived experiences and perceptions. This understanding implies activities and events experienced by agents actually occurs in the domain of the *actual*, whereby the *phenomena* of these actions is experienced and perceived in the *empirical*. Yet, clearly nothing occurs out of nothing. Agents do not create or produce structures 'ab initio' (Ackroyd & Fleetwood, 2000, p. 14), implying collaborative partnership events and actions are produced by pre-existing structures, which agents recreate, transform or reproduce, consciously or unconsciously. Furthermore, agents may not always be conscious of what part they play in reproducing social phenomena (Ackroyd & Fleetwood, 2000). It is then a mistake to reduce social reality to mere empirical accounts and perceptions and assume them to be actual.

Beneath the *empirical* domain lie forces that need to be investigated in order for reliable knowledge about social phenomena to be collected (Sayer, 1992). Staff members operating TNE partnerships maybe hindered, blocked or encouraged to engage in action by underpinning mechanisms, which exist in the domains of the *actual* and *real*. Some may be consciously aware of the forces controlling their behaviours, or they may be ignorant of their existence. For example, depending on the role a staff member adopts within a TNE collaborative partnership, such as course leader, departmental head or local tutor, certain members may not have access to information that could help them make sense of a given situation. Their experiences will therefore, differ and they may be unable to explain why, or how, things have occurred in the way they have. Consequently, the researcher must be aware, that whilst the participant may be describing how they feel about a given situation in the *empirical* domain, to understand why and how these interpretations have occurred, the researcher needs to excavate below the subjective experience. They also need to connect the *empirical* domains of multiple agents to uncover and understand all possible underlying events and actions.

### ***The domain of the 'real'***

Herein lies powers and forces that do not necessarily have to be experienced for individuals to know that they exist. *A priori* knowledge may provide an individual with enough information to know what something is capable of without experiencing it. Collier (1994) argues structures cause ‘powers to be exercised given some form of input or ‘efficient cause’’, and in asking about the structure generating some ‘power of some entity, we are asking about a mechanism generating an event’ (1994, p. 43). A mechanism does not need to be mechanical in nature, but can also represent values, tendencies and instincts that may influence a TNE collaborative partnership, such as prejudices, neo-colonialism or neo-liberalism. Moreover, mechanisms operating in open systems are different from scientific laws of nature operating in closed systems, under controlled conditions.

Events occur in open systems that have multiple mechanisms operating at any one time, conjointly bringing about a series of events. A consequence of this is that although individual mechanisms can be isolated in experimentally closed systems, nature represents a multiplicity of mechanisms that jointly produce a series of events (Bhaskar, 1979). Critical realists believe experiments only show the tendencies of underlying mechanisms, which may or may not occur in regular or observable event sequences. Bhaskar (1979) describes these series of events as representing the domain of the *actual*, with the mechanisms that codetermine them representing the domain of the *real*.

### **Administrating critical realism: An example of two Chinese-British collaborative partnerships**

Critical realists believe any methods, are in principle, capable of explanatory power. Focus is therefore, on the broader issue of research design and appropriateness (Ackroyd & Fleetwood, 2000). Critical realists are thus concerned with using methods that are appropriate to the subject under investigation. Philosophically, critical realism is relatively tolerant of a variety of research methods, with choice focusing on the nature of the object of the study and what one wants to learn about it. One way to approach TNE collaborative partnership research is to use critical realism in conjunction with a case study methodology. Since case study research focuses upon detailed examinations and explanations of certain phenomena, with the objective of understanding why things as they are, Easton (2010) argues “critical realism is particularly well suited as a companion to case study research” (2010, p. 119). Unlike scientific methods such as experimentation, where the phenomenon can be deliberately separated from its context, case study research appreciates the blurred boundaries that exist between phenomena and context.

The research example presented herein adopted a multiple-case study design, consisting of two Chinese-British partnerships. Due to the differences that exist in TNE collaborative partnership modes of delivery, it was important to ensure a level of consistency in terms of the provision type and delivery methods. Both partnerships were classified by the UK Higher Education Statistics Agency as representing forms of collaborative provision. Although each partnership did contain a level of variance, in terms of the courses, access to teaching resources, and differed in terms of the UK awarding provider, both cases had synergy when it came to the host country, host institution (X), mode of delivery (flying faculty and block teaching), and regulatory bodies (e.g. the Higher Education Evaluation Centre of the Ministry of Chinese Education and the UK QAA).

Access to the research sample was possible through the researcher’s TNE network, and comprised of ‘operational academic members’ (academic members of staff, such as programme leaders, course leaders, module leaders, local tutors or academics) who were involved in the operational (teaching and learning) delivery of their partnership. All UK and China-based ‘operational academic members’ were from Western countries, thereby sharing similar traditions and values. Whilst participant numbers may seem low, the participation rates as a percentage were 100% of academic members from partnership A and 50% for partnership B. The configuration of each case and participant pseudonyms are outlined in table 2.

Chinese Institution	UK Institution	Partnership	Discipline	Partnership Duration	China-based Academic Members	UK Academic Members
X (Single institution in China)	A	(X and) A	Business (Management)	6 years	<b>China-based A</b> 1 course leader <i>Tom</i> 2 local academics <i>Hannah, Eliza</i>	<b>UKA</b> 1 course leader <i>Ann</i> 2 module leaders <i>Louise, Keith</i>
	B	(X and) B	Business (Finance)	6 years	<b>China-based B</b> 1 course leader <i>David</i> 2 local academics <i>Sally, Charles</i>	<b>UKB</b> 1 course leader <i>Lidia</i> 2 module leaders <i>Rob, Claire</i>

Table 2: Partnership configuration

At this point we postulate: How can the *empirical* domain of the subjective experience be harnessed to enable a detailed analysis of TNE collaborative partnership events and mechanisms to occur? A critical realist tradition requires the researcher to penetrate the subjective experience, so to explore the domains of the *actual* and the *real*. This occurs through a process of *retroduction*, whereby the researcher moves backwards through the data, postulating and identifying the events and mechanisms which are producing the subjective experiences (Sayer, 1992). By asking participants questions about their *lived experiences* of working within a TNE collaborative partnership, the aim was to understand their subjective experiences, making it possible to uncover the underlying mechanisms that explain what caused events and subsequent experiences to occur (Easton, 2010).

Since critical realism requires the researcher to engage with the *empirical* domain of its participants, a qualitative research tool was required that could extract the required level of experiential detail so analysis of the domains of the *actual* and the *real* could occur. All participants were sent a project outline and ethical approval was sought from all key stakeholders. Participants were then invited to attend an individual, semi-structured interview by the researcher, regarding their perceptions of partnership work. For example, their feelings about colleagues, their work and responsibilities, and daily activities; whilst reflecting upon any significant partnership events and what they felt about them. Each interview lasted approximately between 80- 90 minutes, was recorded and subsequently transcribed. Each transcript was analysed thematically by hand. Initially, the transcripts were coded based on descriptive, low inference codes, before inferential pattern codes were used to pull together material into more meaningful units that corresponded with the domains of critical realism. Consequently, the researcher was able to highlight moments where insights into the domains of the *actual* (events and actions) and the *real* (mechanisms) became apparent.

### **A vignette of data generated and analysis**

The following example extracts highlight the merit of applying critical realism in a study of TNE collaborative partnerships. Operational faculty members described certain operational events (*actual*) and how they felt about them (*empirical*). From this, it became possible to evaluate these events and identify the underpinning mechanisms (*real*) that seemed to be influencing these events and participant experiences of them.

#### ***Underpinning mechanism: time***

In both partnership cases A and B, participants explained how UK and Chinese holiday cycles rendered teaching and assessment events problematic. *Hannah, Eliza (China-based A)* and *Sally (China-based B)* all described how conflicting calendars left them feeling “isolated”, “worried” and “alone” when their UK colleagues were on annual leave or away on academic trips. Conflicting academic calendars were also discussed by UK colleagues, with *Claire (UKB)* pointedly stating:

Even just the little things, like when exams are on, it could be Chinese holiday or something, we’ve got to reschedule...fit around those, and that keeps them (China-based B) happy.

*Keith (UKA)* expressed how “great upset” was caused between colleagues when “organising block teaching weeks that coincide with UK and Chinese teaching schedules”. He felt staff “morale and motivation” was affected by the extra work required to find cover for classes or reschedule UK teaching. Furthermore, *Ann (UKA)* described how the eight-hour time delay between the UK and China made her feel “exhausted”, describing how, as a course leader, she was “expected to answer emails during the early hours” so her China-based colleagues could start their day promptly.

As participants shared their *lived experiences* it became apparent that assessment tasks caused the most stress amongst colleagues. *Rob, Claire (UKB), Hannah, Tom (China-based A)* and *Louise (UKA)* all referred to feeling some sort of anxiety around examination periods. As *Hannah* explained:

Coursework, exams, there were so so many periods of this pressured time, it was like impossible to communicate with anyone...January is the worst time ever here and it’s like yeah, Chinese New Year, coursework marking, exam time and its hard to balance all this. We felt really really exhausted.

It seems, that whilst all participants could express and describe their emotional responses to a teaching or assessment event, the key underlying mechanism, not always explicitly acknowledged by everyone was: *time*. It was clear, as participants shared their subjective experiences of significant events that these were being manipulated by time; a mechanism functioning in the domain of the *real*. Time therefore, influences how staff members react and respond to events (assessment for example), playing a significant role in how the event is

managed and governed. Consequently, it is argued, that time should be a key underlying mechanism that requires consideration from anyone wishing to manage a productive TNE collaborative partnership.

### ***Underpinning mechanism: cultural difference***

Participants also noted how pressures created by cultural differences made their partnerships convoluted. *Ann (UKA)*, *Tom (China-based A)* and *David (China-based B)* were particularly vocal, expressing a sense of frustration when trying to harmonise two different educational systems. As *David* explains;

You need to have cultural sensitivity because there is different legislation and different student expectations and legal procedures...it's different from the UK and the actions taken need to be different.

All participants were acutely aware of how governmental, sector, institutional or specific regulations (for example, the utilisation of set teaching resources, access to technology or methodological frameworks) coupled with set time frames for the completion of tasks, rendered certain partnership activities frustrating. *Ann (UKA)* described feeling “frustrated” by the arbitrary audit processes undertaken by Chinese authorities, whilst *Tom (China-based A)* described it as something he “had to do, please understand I have to have the information”. Tensions were further raised when *Tom* struggled to understand and implement UK QAA procedures when they were subject to a desk-based review (QAA, 2013).

*Louise, Keith (UKA)* and *Rob* and *Claire (UKB)* all shared their experiences of assessment and feedback events that seemed to cause them concern and apprehension; with *Claire* making the point;

The exams were very similar to the model answers...only a low number, so we accepted the marks this time, but I don't know how to deal with it...it's a real problem, maybe its rote learning or something, you know, different cultures?

*Louise (UKA)* supports this notion, whereby she suggests that “differences in the educational systems” creates “tensions between colleagues in the application of UK policies and procedures”.

The examples provided herein, give a flavour of the type of insights a researcher can protract when applying a critical realist lens. It became apparent that two key underpinning mechanisms were influencing collaborative partnership operations: *time* and *cultural difference*. These *real* forces therefore, rendered certain events in the domain of the *actual*, such as assessment, teaching and audit activities, problematic. These events left all participants experiencing (*empirical*), some sort of isolation, frustration or grievance. Institutional stakeholders with TNE responsibilities are as a result, are encouraged to consider the way their partnership structures and systems are influenced by *time* and *cultural difference*.

## **Conclusion**

The aim of this paper was to establish grounds for the use of an alternative paradigm when studying TNE collaborative partnerships. Through an exploration of functionalism and interpretivism, it becomes apparent as to how each paradigm postulates *partnership*. Functionalism highlights the structural, functional and regulatory aspects of the collaborative venture, along with its strategic benefits, taking a quantitative approach. In contrast, interpretivism enables the more nuanced and subjective elements to be observed, whereby qualitative investigations show the importance of subjective behaviours and experiences. Evidently, both dimensions are important when trying to explore collaborative partnerships, since both play a pivotal role in producing and maintaining a collaborative venture. When investigating a collaborative arrangement, it is recommended that researchers engage with both the subjective and objective dimensions required to produce this type of partnership.

Due to the exploratory nature of critical realism, and its ability to excavate beyond the *empirical* domain, it becomes possible to connect with deeper, hidden structural and objective forces that constrain and enable this form of partnership work. This paper acknowledges that it only provides insight into a small fragment of what is possible by applying critical realism. For example, by identifying *time* as a key underpinning mechanism, affecting collaborative work and development. It is hoped that by encouraging more TNE collaborative partnership scholars to engage with critical realism, research findings can become more comprehensive, providing HEIs and their TNE ambassadors with more robust analytics on which to make complex practice-based decisions.

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