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Strategy and sustainability discourses in higher education partnership building between China and UK

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ABSTRACT

Accompanied by an emergent 'strategy' and 'sustainability' discourse, international higher education (HE) partnership building has become increasingly orchestrated by non-academic (i.e. operational, and managerial) agents, thereby shifting away from universities' 'academic heartland'. The purpose of this article is to scrutinise the frequently used, yet often ill-defined, 'strategic' and 'sustainable' nature of international partnership building and the way it transforms power dynamics and sense of agency both across and within universities. Drawing on qualitative research with university staff at two partnering higher education institutions (HEIs) in UK and China, this article explores different interpretations of what strategic and sustainable partnership building means and sheds light on the conflicts that emerge between academic and non-academic stakeholders in this process. In doing so, it highlights the all-pervasive influence of managerialism in HE and the potential effects it can have on the success or failure of international partnerships.

KEYWORDS

Higher education; strategic partnerships; internationalisation; sustainability; managerialism; UK; China

Introduction

During the rapid expansion of higher education globally over the past decades, international higher education partnership developments have been described as 'plentiful in number but thin in substance' (Sutton 2010, 61). However, and contrary to this polemic assessment, there has also been a gradual shift from 'opportunistic and contract-led' towards 'strategic' and 'niche' partnerships which favour quality over quantity and emphasise 'sustainability' as a core objective (Lawton et al. 2013). Aligned with institutional 'vision' and guided by centralised 'strategic' and 'sustainable' rhetoric, there seems to be a growing consensus that international partnerships ought to become 'fewer in number and thicker in substance'.

Within the wider context of HE internationalisation in the neoliberal era (Egron-Polak and Marmolejo 2017; Naidoo 2018; Bamberger, Morris, and Yemini 2019), such strategic shifts in partnership building are a deliberate choice that many universities make to ensure that international engagement is streamlined with an institution's profile, league table position, mission and vision, as well as disciplinary strengths, so as to manage and optimise human and financial resources (Chan 2004).

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What is interesting from a historical perspective, however, and marks a decisive shift in partnership building internationally is that central university administration, rather than academic stakeholders, ought to drive and implement strategic change. As Kehm and Teichler (2007) observed, there has been a growing influence coming from what they call the ‘periphery’ of HEIs, that is, non-academic ‘service’, managerial and administrative units (e.g. international partnership offices), which shape a university’s international profile and strategic directions. Drawing on Kehm and Teichler’s assessment, we argue that, in the context of omnipresent managerialism in neoliberal higher education (Shepherd 2018), this centre-periphery relationship is being inverted by gradually pushing academic actors towards the margins of international partnership building.

The power of strategic and administrative stakeholders runs parallel to comprehensive approaches to internationalisation within most universities where they exert as much influence as academic groups (Hunter 2018). This represents a major difference from previous international partnership building processes (e.g. the European ERASMUS programme) which were largely carried and sustained by academics on a faculty or departmental level, aided by administrative and middle management support (Hunter, Jones, and de Wit 2018). Although international partnerships continue to be facilitated by both institutional management and academic agents ‘on the ground’, research indicates that there exist contradictory goals between these two spheres (Hunter 2018; Oleksiyenko 2014; Turner and Robson 2007, 2008, 2009). Situated in the disjuncture between managerial and academic stakeholders, strategic international partnership building can thus become contested, even more so when it is intended to be ‘sustainable’, that is, to be maintained over time at a certain rate or level.

Underpinned by neoliberal principles of rationalisation and gaining competitive advantage, re-strategising international partnerships is not limited to Western/Anglophone higher education institutions. It has become equally significant in China’s growing HE sector, where the gradual adaptation of neoliberal elements into centralised state reforms has impacted universities’ partnership choices in pursuit of competitive ‘development’ and ‘world-class’ quality agendas (Mok 2007; Bamberger, Morris, and Yemini 2019). Thus, this article explores how the idea of strategic international partnership building is increasingly seen as a ‘solution’ to build sustainable international university linkages in both Western/Anglophone and Chinese universities, highlighting the growing disjuncture between managerial and academic perceptions of such partnership building across institutions and countries.

The notion ‘strategic sustainable partnership’ (building, development, and arrangement) has emerged as a keyword in organisational and management studies since the 1990s to aid organisations cope with challenges posed by an increasingly competitive global market environment. For example, Trim and Lee (2007), adopting a management perspective, emphasise that strategic partnership arrangements between organisations need to be mutually oriented, trust-based and risk-aware; likewise, they ought to be underpinned by combined ownership, continuous organisational learning, and a hybrid organisational culture. In the growing field of (international) higher education studies, the ‘strategic’ and ‘sustainable’ dimensions of international partnership building remain weakly defined. In this respect, Heffernan’s and Poole’s (2005) key success factors of ‘effective’ international university partnerships have retained value, emphasising communication (open, honest, timely, culturally sensitive), mutual trust or ‘vibe’ (e.g.

contractual; ‘little things’ and clues of trustworthiness), and commitment (e.g. enthusiasm, integrity, and leadership) as key ingredients. Rather than the alternatively used terms (international) ‘collaboration’ or ‘cooperation’, we employ the term ‘partnership’ as we feel it helps accentuate the human and individual relational dimensions of mutuality, trust and inclusivity we seek to draw out.

We start by outlining how the current HE discourse around ‘strategy’ comes to affect the sustainability considerations of international partnerships, highlighting the disconnect between institutions and individuals on constructing strategic international partnerships to achieve such imagined sustainability. Next, we illustrate how the strategic significance in international partnership development has emerged in two contrasting political contexts – China and UK – and the corresponding implications for universities’ construction of sustainable international partnerships in each country.

Then, we introduce the views of interviewees participating in this research, followed by an analysis of how the idea of strategic and sustainable international partnership building is both promoted and resisted among staff at both institutions. The paper concludes with a critical discussion on the sustainability considerations of institutions’ international footprint in maintaining meaningful and viable partnerships.

The strategic significance in sustaining international HE partnerships

The strategic significance of international partnership development is largely underpinned by a rationale of global competitiveness, positioning and enhanced reputation management of HEIs (Sakamoto and Chapman 2011; Zhuang 2009) within the wider landscape of globalised and neoliberal higher education (Egron-Polak and Marmolejo 2017; Bamberger, Morris, and Yemini 2019). To advance their international reputation and global ranking positions, HEIs seek to partner with ‘world-leading’ collaborators (Chan 2004; Knight 2008), anticipating that such partnerships will strengthen their international profile (Klemenčič 2017). The global ranking of universities has thus a major influence when it comes to the ‘strategic’ selection of partners and may determine the form, nature and duration a partnership can take (Locke 2014). In this competitive climate, and guided by universal ‘quality’ principles (Gao 2015), it is not surprising that universities prefer to partner with a smaller number of institutions which they believe to be of equal or better stature (Taylor 2010). Alongside university rankings, strategic decisions on international partnership building are informed by revenue generation since universities can increase their income substantially through enhanced branding, exporting educational services and charging high fees to overseas students (Gao 2015; Leng 2014).

Whilst the proliferation of fewer, more purposeful partnerships can be seen as a positive stimulus for HE internationalisation, such a strategic change could equally swamp partnerships with self-serving, rather than mutual, institutional agendas, primarily driven by increased global competition and economic calculus. Indeed, Djerasimovic (2014) argues that if the primary motivation of partnership building is inward-looking revenue generation and profile enhancement, it runs the risk of neglecting sustainability and quality, particularly in view of more meaningful and forward-looking intercultural, hybrid and equitable forms of collaboration. Similarly, Hayhoe, Pan, and Zha (2013) point out that ‘the most important and most difficult lesson’ learned from the legacy of previous partnerships between Canadian

and Chinese universities is that commercially motivated collaborations are becoming increasingly insufficient and short-lived. Despite these criticisms, partnerships serving institutional interest and strategy are produced and reproduced in good numbers, particularly in China, whose ongoing HE expansion and proliferation of international ‘flagship’ institutions has opened a plethora of avenues to develop strategic partnerships with top-ranking universities in the global and predominantly Anglophone, west (Gao 2015).

In practical terms, such a transformation becomes evident in the challenges faced by the administrative and managerial agents in charge of developing partnerships. These include balancing the often contradictory goals pursued by central management and individual faculties or schools, between involved administrative and academic communities, mitigating miscommunication between different administrative units, as well as handling excessive bureaucracy (Hunter 2018). Looking at the internationalisation strategy of one British university, Turner and Robson (2007) found that centralised and income-driven approaches to internationalisation may further disengage academics from institutional internationalisation, potentially obstructing integrated management intention for internationalisation. In a subsequent study, they also highlight the potential negative consequences that centralised ‘top-down’ processes of internationalisation have on academics’ lived experiences and professional identities (Turner and Robson 2009). Similarly, Eddy (2010) found that central university ‘reward’ policies supposed to encourage international academic collaborations have in fact discouraged individual academics to engage in partnership activity.

All this indicates that the tensions between values, visions and strategic goals can place international partnerships in a fragile position amidst power struggles that not only unfold inter-institutionally but also intra-institutionally and thus may become obstacles to anticipated ‘sustainability’ goals (Oleksiyenko 2014). If shared belief and understanding is not reached, or overwritten by strategic (economic) agendas, sustainable partnership building is bound to fail because it ‘ultimately depends on the active involvement of all partners’ (Klemenčič 2017, 104). This means that stakeholders need to build rapport and trust not only *between* but also *within* institutions, and institutional leadership, at the very least, should empower individual faculty to foster and forge inter-institutional collaboration (Denman 2004).

Based on the above and being aware of the complexities of international partnership building in neoliberal HE contexts, we do not hark back to a quasi-romantic image of the travelling scholar/academy who/which initiates international partnerships through the very ‘substance’ of teaching, scholarship, and research. Rather, we propose that, in search for ‘sustainability’ in international HE partnerships, equality and mutuality play a significant role in diminishing the growing divergencies between different institutional stakeholders or between institutional ‘centres’ and ‘peripheries’.

Strategy and sustainability discourses in international higher education partnership building in the UK and China

We are interested in looking at how ‘sustainability’ in international HE partnership is discursively shaped in two national contexts, UK and China. Over recent years, both countries have intensified bilateral international HE collaborations (e.g. British Council

2020), yet present striking differences in their historical contexts and national policy strategies towards HE internationalisation. These contrasting historical, ideological, and (geo-)political interpretations on internationalisation between UK and China shape the trajectories in which HEIs pursue their respective internationalisation strategies and partnerships in a given context.

A 'revenue generation' strategy and its financial sustainability in the UK

An overview on UK's internationalisation policies – *PMI (Prime Minister's Initiative)*, *PMI2 (Prime Minister's Initiative 2)* and *IES (International Education Strategy)* between 1999 and 2013 – illustrate how raising income, international reach and institutional profile have become a consistent trajectory in British higher education. With the UK's recent exit from the European Union, maintaining HE as an important 'export sector' beyond Europe is likely to remain a key priority and is underpinned by a new political rhetoric of 'Global Britain' (Kleibert 2020). From a recent historical perspective, increasing the number of international students constituted the main thrust of Tony Blair's *Prime Minister's Initiative*. The *PMI* set targets to increase the number of non-EU international students studying in the UK by 75,000 by the year 2005, 50,000 in Higher Education and 25,000 in Further Education. This was a great success as the targets were exceeded ahead of schedule, with an extra 93,000 in Higher Education and 23,300 in Further Education (Blair 1999). While hailed as a success in numbers, the focus on intense short-term international student recruitment was heavily criticised, precisely for its lack of a sustainable agenda (Bone 2008). To respond to the criticism and restore the credibility of the UK education brand, the *Prime Minister's Initiative 2* promoted a more far-reaching internationalisation agenda by 'building *sustainable* partnerships between our universities and colleges and those of other countries' (Blair 2006, emphasised by the authors). However, and while appearing more inclusive and mutual in tone, the notion of 'partnership' represents a different, more covert, approach to student recruitment in the UK (Lomer 2016). In 2013, the British policy on international higher education entered a new phase when the conservative-liberal democrat coalition government initiated the *International Education Strategy*. By then, UK HE internationalisation was overtly framed as an 'export' category and a national economic growth agenda where international partnership and transnational education (TNE) ventures constitute another significant channel of income generation besides tuition fees (Lomer, Papatsiba, and Naidoo 2018). Ever since, and further amplified by the election of majority conservative governments since 2015, 'international engagement' in HE is now openly endorsed as a vehicle for income generation via increased student recruitment, tuition fees and TNE operations. Against the recent economic setbacks caused by Brexit and the global Covid-19 crisis, a clear indicator for such income-driven national HE agenda is the current UK government's target to increase revenue generated by 'education-related export and transnational education' from £23.3bn in 2018 to £35bn by 2030 and international student recruitment from around 486.000 to 600.000 within the same period (Harris 2020). In view of these ambitious national targets, the economic rationale behind building, legitimising, and sustaining international partnerships is obvious and likely to remain a key priority among HE managers and strategists operating within UK universities.

A 'world-class' strategy and its sustained 'exclusivity' in China

Looking at China's internationalisation agenda over the past three decades, such as *The Outline for Reform and Development of Education (Reform and Development)* in 1993, *The Action Plan for Revitalisation of Education in the Twenty-First Century (Action Plan)* in 1999 as well as *The National Outline for Mid- and Long-term Education Planning and Development (Mid-Long-term Plan 2010–2020)* in 2010, shows how international engagement with 'world-class' partners has become an increasingly embedded discourse in Chinese HE and determines the strategic means in international partnership building.

In line with a progressing 'Open-Door' policy, the *Reform and Development* policy in 1993 first aspired to establish 100 universities reaching global reach and significance, as well as a group of selected research institutes to be ranked among the best in the world. Following from that, the *Action Plan* in 1999, as Wang (2014, 14) notes, 'went further in its quest for world-class status' (i.e. not just 'world-class university', 'world-class discipline', 'world-class level' but also 'international leading status'), thus suggesting 'a new interpretation of internationalisation'. The *Action Plan* was set in the wider context and national agenda of creating a knowledge-based economy connected to the wider dream of Chinese national rejuvenation (Postiglione 2016). More importantly, government-sponsored international cooperations started to appear in national policy, particularly encouraging international academic mobility, albeit such a sponsorship was limited to research or scholarly activities with 'world-class' universities abroad. In this sense, the strategic significance of international partners in the national policy discourse is measured against 'world-class' quality parameters. The *Mid-Long-term Plan (2010–2020)* aimed at building national capacity and further pursuing the dream of Chinese national rejuvenation, emphasising research and development as key priorities. In particular, the establishment of joint Research and Development (R&D) Centres in partnership with 'high-level' overseas institutes ought to help China reshape and optimise its higher education system. However, the strategic significance framed around the 'world-class' discourse may no longer be adequate for meeting a wide-range of educational needs emerging from an increasingly diversified student body. This is particularly pertinent since China's higher education has been transformed from massification to universalisation, with its gross enrolment ratio of higher education (GER) reaching 51.6% in 2019 (Ministry of Education 2020) compared to 48.1% in 2018 (Ministry of Education 2019). Despite these developments, the strategic significance placed on 'excellence' and 'world-class' is frequently referenced by university administrators and managers, leaving little room for alternative imaginations of what a sustainable international partnership can be, or might comprise, otherwise.

Methods

This paper presents research carried out in, and between, two universities situated both in the UK (England) and China which have developed a mutual partnership since the 1990s and are also engaged in other international partnership schemes such as Global University Network and Consortium. The Chinese university is more research intensive,

and part of the '985 Project' institution while the UK-based university is a research and teaching institution as well as a civic university. These two universities were selected based on four criteria.

First, both universities are public research universities established in the early 20th century and have a relatively long-standing history of international engagement. This historical dimension allows us to reflect on how the forging of international partnerships has developed over time and also, how this previous experience informs current strategies of institutional internationalisation and engagement with partners overseas.

Second, both universities are 'comprehensive' in that they offer varied academic disciplines across an established structure of Faculties, Schools and Departments. Rather than focusing on specialist HEIs, this variety allowed to reach, and interview, different academic and non-academic stakeholders representing a wide range of professional and disciplinary areas.

Third, we purposefully selected two universities which, despite a shared history of collaboration, have developed different or even divergent internationalisation agendas over recent years, mainly due to their global ranking positions as well as the wider national strategic objectives described above. As such, they provide a suitable comparative lens through which to illustrate some of the complexities, possibilities and potential dilemmas that characterise current trends in international partnership building between China and the UK more generally.

Finally, the practicality of access at the time of research was also a criterion in selecting these two universities.

A glimpse at the UK university's strategic plan reveals that the institution sees itself as 'internationally engaged' and seeks to build 'winning partnerships' by enhancing marketing and communications. Likewise, and listed as another key strategy, the university aims at 'ensuring a sustainable future' by focusing on academic, operational and financial sustainability, professional services and investing in the continued development of physical and ICT environment ("Strategic Plan 2016–2020," The UK University (2020)). More specifically, and according to the Pro-Vice Chancellor (International), sustainability will be achieved by a thorough review of all 'international activity', including a detailed 'mapping' of research partnerships and alumni engagement, a reassessment of international travel; study abroad and summer school activity, as well as the establishment of an International Executive Group to manage these processes and implement a more effective strategy. Ultimately, such a rigorous review ought to result in sustaining 'fewer more strategic' partnerships with 'like-minded institutions' based on 'complementary research strengths and shared educational values' (PVC International 2019; Strategic Plan 2020–2025, 6).

By contrast, the Chinese university's strategic plan shows that the institution aims to become 'an internationally renowned high-level research university' with a strong commitment to developing substantial international cooperation with 50 universities ranked top 200 in the world by 2020 ("The 13th Five-Year Plan and Long-term Plan," The China University (2016)). The strategic emphasis lies on building a limited number of partnerships "... with 50 universities ranked top 200 in the world' by 2020 ("The 13th Five-Year Plan and Long-term Plan," The China University (2016), 13). As for the academic departments, *'every school (research institute) is expected to add 2 partnerships with internationally renowned academic departments, research institutes or high-tech*

Table 1. A brief introduction of the interview participants.

Sites	Roles	Institutional/Departmental/Disciplines
UK	Managerial (5) Academic (12)	Senior leadership team, international office and quality office, etc. Sciences, Humanities and Social Sciences
China	Managerial (6) Academic (8)	Senior leadership team, international office, etc. Sciences, Humanities and Social Sciences

enterprises and multinational corporations' ("The 11th Five-Year Plan and 2021 Long-term Plan," The China University (2006), 7) and '*... to have 3–5 partnerships ... by 2015*' ("The 12th Five-Year Plan and 2021 Long-term Plan," The China University (2011), 18).

To investigate how both universities' discourse towards fewer, more strategic, and more sustainable partnerships is playing out in practice, we recruited a sizeable number of interview participants at both HEIs. A contact list was made according to university administrative departments, academic disciplines, key informants' positions, and corresponding responsibilities regarding international engagement. Following our invitation via email, a total of 31 participants (17 from England and 14 from China, see Table 1) agreed to take part in a face-to face semi-structured interview.

Besides general introductory questions around biography and career, the interview schedule was composed of six core questions revolving around participants' subjective understanding of 'international partnerships' and the associated notion of 'sustainability'. Further, we asked about their professional experiences with and 'lessons learnt' from international partnership building, as well as identifying potential challenges emerging in the process. Each of these core questions was complemented with prompts not only to allow for an open and flowing conversation, but also to develop a more specific narrative on partnership building experiences between or beyond UK and China.

The core interview questions (without prompts) are listed below and serve as a guide for the following analysis:

Q1) *Could you tell me about your views on international partnerships between higher education institutions?*

Q2) *When you hear the term 'sustainability', what does this mean to you in the context of international partnerships?*

Q3) *Tell me a bit of your role and responsibilities of engaging in international partnerships in the University/Faculty/School/Department?*

Q4) *Tell me a bit of your experiences of engaging in international partnerships in the University/Faculty/School/Department? (with prompts)*

Q5) *What lessons have you learnt from past experiences of developing international partnerships?*

Q6) *What do you see challenges of developing a sustainable international partnership in the future?*

Once completed, interviews were transcribed verbatim and systematically analysed in three steps, including NVivo software, merging and creating hierarchies through a coding frame to allow main themes emerge. Considering the ethical care for our research participants, each of them was assigned a number to warrant their anonymity, yet their professional remit and broader disciplinary background are indicated. Their university affiliation is abbreviated to CNHEI (Chinese higher education institution) and UKHEI (UK-based higher education institution) in the following presentation of findings.

Thinking sustainable strategic partnerships through ‘periphery’ and ‘academic heartland’

One of the aims of this study was to investigate the shifting power relationship between what we have described as ‘periphery’ (i.e. managerial/operational agents) and the ‘academic heartland’ (i.e. academic staff) at both universities in view of strategic and ‘sustainable’ international partnership building. To this end, our findings reveal that specifically the interviewed (senior) managerial and administration agents at both universities consider strategic international partnerships as a ‘solution’ to evade and counter potentially unsustainable university operations. Adopting a pragmatic perspective, they believe that the sustainability of strategic international and inter-institutional partnerships largely depends on the commitment of, and the resources provided by, central university. Conversely, the academic stakeholders at both universities struggle to recognise this strategic approach and, indeed, consider it to be an illusion in terms of establishing sustainable linkages. Interviews also revealed that growing centralisation in partnership building is likely to lead to academics losing interests, trust, and engagement in this strategic approach.

The UK narrative

Sutton’s (2010, 61) judgment that international partnerships have become ‘plentiful in number but thin in substance’ seems, to some extent, echoed by the managerial staff interviewed at the UK university. Asked about their views on, and engagement with, international partnerships in the interview (Q1, Q4), managerial staff reveal that, while there exist a good number of partnerships, only a few of them are filled with meaningful substance. More often than not, they seem to solely exist ‘on paper’ in the form of signed agreements. A former high-ranking member of the UK university’s leadership team states:

... when I arrived, I asked for a list of the universities with which the university collaborated and had an agreement, and I was given a list which was more than a page of the institutions. I looked down at it, what we’re doing with this institution? Nobody to tell me. What we’re doing with this? Nobody to tell me (Interviewee 17, formerly senior leadership, UKHEI).

Drawing on this statement, many signed international agreements appeared to be empty gestures because ‘*nobody*’ seemed to know what was actually happening in these partnerships. In response to this dilemma, and asked what ‘sustainability’ meant to them (Q2), managerial staff emphasised that a focused approach to partnerships and a real commitment to ‘wanting them to work’ are key requirements,

... you cannot have significant relations with all of these institutions. They are just on the list. But when you have a list, maybe you know, 10, I mean, oh, well, this institution is clearly wanting these relationships to work (Interviewee 17, formerly senior leadership, UKHEI).

In line with the university's revised international strategy, the solution seems to be to commit to fewer, but more substantial relationships. In addition to '*want[ing] these relationships to work*', the range of partners is stretched, and thus, it is about deciding which ones are worth '*look[ing] deeper*'. Another factor in justifying the (strategic) necessity of selecting partnerships more purposefully concerns the resources the university has to develop them 'sustainably' – a theme that emerged in relation to Q4 and Q5 in the interviews. For example, the Deputy Director of the International Office explained that partnerships are prone to fail if the university does not calculate how to back up and sustain its development financially:

We've got resource here to do that. So, it's being selective ... we need to make sure we concentrate on a few good ones that we can actually resource, we talk about, having a few strategic partners that we do things very well (Interviewee 12, Deputy Director of International Office, UKHEI).

This quote suggests that strategic partnerships are based upon deliberate selection rather than *ad-hoc* practice. Before establishing any partnerships, available resources and 'due diligence' factors are used to narrow down the list of relationships, emphasising substance rather than gesture. Such strategic planning seems a high-level arrangement, based on senior leaders' vision that informs decisions as to whether an institution is included. However, well-strategised, managerial staff also clearly see that the building of sustainable relationships is bound to fail if the involved individuals do not commit 'from top to bottom', instead of assuming that the implementation is automatically happening 'in a downwards and hierarchical fashion' (Williams 2013). Asked about previous experiences and 'lessons learned' from international partnership development (Q4 & Q5), the Deputy Director of the International Office at the UK University replied,

... you have to make sure the engagement is from top to the bottom really. You've got buy-in and people actually want to do it. It's not going to be the sheer commitment to do it and the staff feel like they are forced to do it. It's never going to sustain self at all (Interviewee 12, Deputy Director of International Office, UKHEI).

While recognising the role of 'people' and academic interests in making partnerships work in a concerted and sustainable way, the financial language of '*buying in*' people '*from top to bottom*' seems indicative of an overarching investment-driven narrative. Furthermore, the 'buying in' metaphor also suggests that sole responsibility for international partnership building lies with managerial agents (international office in this case) and does not necessarily recognise 'bottom-up' initiatives coming from the 'academic heartland'.

Reflecting on interviews with senior and middle-management staff at the UK university, it becomes clear that financial return is seen as the main driver against which the quality and continuity of most proposed partnerships are measured. This view is echoed

in the following explanation provided by the Head of Quality Office at the UK university when asked about their views on the purpose of international partnership building (Q1, prompt 2),

I mean, that's the drive, first drive, it's got to be. We could make other arguments. The principal drive must be the student numbers, i.e., finance (Interviewee 4, Head of Quality Office, UKHEI).

Drawing on this and similar responses by other UK-based interviewees, 'income generation' and/or 'return on investment' appear to be the vital nexus on which partnerships are defined and constructed, either in an overt or covert way. Without embedding income generation in any type of international engagement, partnerships are deemed unsustainable, as is stated in the following response to interview question 2, relating to the meaning of 'sustainability' in the context of international partnerships,

You just go down the recruitment route, that's not sustainable. You just go down the research route, that's not sustainable either, because you are not generating income. So, you spent a lot of time doing lots of research and start building research partnerships, stuff like that. But where is the tangible benefit to the university? So, if you put into money to do something, there has to be a return. So business is always there (Interviewee 12, Deputy Director of International Office, UKHEI).

According to this statement, the particular rush for income generation through singular partnership 'routes' (i.e. student recruitment and research) is fragile and unsustainable. Likewise, existing and often long-established research partnerships, a core element of international engagement in the academic 'heartland', seem rendered insufficient and financially 'intangible'. This is likely to put more pressure on academics to act sustainably in financial terms only, thus further disconnecting them with their institution.

According to interviews with academic staff at the UK university, the regional 'anchor' institution seems to struggle with increased competition and austerity, thus pushing administrators and managers to prioritise income generation when it comes to international partnership building. This context makes academics feel frustrated as they bear the pressure of '*bring[ing] in money*' and be accountable to the institution. Such an income-driven approach to international partnership building appears to disconnect institutional strategy from academics' interests, leaving the latter to react with cynicism and doubt towards central management and administration.

One of the impacts on individual academics is that central university will exclusively support financially profitable/sustainable partnerships which produce 'tangible' short and long-term benefits. Sharing their experience with international partnership building (Q4), a Senior Lecturer in Environment suggests that university support for partnership development goes to whoever is considered '*more reliable in bringing in the money*',

I think what would happen is the people who they see as being more reliable of bringing in the money would get the money (Interviewee 15, Senior Lecturer in Environment, UKHEI).

Reflecting on this brief but revealing statement, individual engagement 'on the ground' is challenged due to pressures exerted on each academic by central university, thereby not only creating a climate of internal competition for international engagement, but

potentially one of inequality too (e.g. more experienced and senior academics being advantaged). Based on our interviews with agents in the ‘academic heartland’, this sense of pressure, inadequacy or internal competition is likely to eradicate their interest and engagement in partnership building. This perception is echoed in the following quote by a Professor in Science with a considerable track record of international engagement,

[t]hey are not creating the interests’, instead, ‘they are doing the administration’ . . . I really don’t believe the high level with this. Because in the international office (. . .) that’s not the high level necessarily. International office is the facilitator. It’s making it possible for students to exchange. They are doing the administration. They are not creating the interest. The interest is created by the individual departments, not the university, the individual departments, yeah? Then they come to tell the international offices and then it goes . . . ‘If you don’t have academics doing that for best ability, you don’t have it’. So, you make anything you want out of inter-university cooperation, but you will fail as a university if you don’t do it at the level of individual academics, you know. I rest my case. (Interviewee 3, Professor in Science, UKHEI).

Drawing on this narrative of an experienced academic, there is a clear sense that institutional international engagement is met with distrust and a fair amount of frustration. Similarly, a Reader in Social Science with a rich experience in international research and scholarship shows little confidence in the institutional international strategies. Reflecting on their experience with international partnerships (Q5), they state

I think some of the networks can be great artificially. You can have an institutional network. But often I found my experience that they don’t sustain because there is no real interest from the ground (Interviewee 9, Reader in Education, UKHEI).

Representing the views held among interviewees within the whole UK sample, the above quotes reveal that a centralised university approach to international partnership building is countered with some distrust and disillusion from individual academics and often hampers their interest and passion for international engagement.

The Chinese narrative

According to its strategic vision, and quite contrary to the previously discussed UK case, the Chinese university is moving towards a ‘new’ and ‘optimistic’ period of ‘*engaging with the world*’, seemingly full of choices and possibilities. Generously supported by government investment aimed at building ‘world class’ universities (Allen 2019) within the national ‘excellence’ scheme, the key driver is to build ‘exclusive partnerships’ with the best (i.e. highest ranked) overseas universities. Such a reputation-driven approach to strategic international partnerships, however, also fuels tensions between institutional centres and peripheries in particular, putting increased pressure on academic communities, schools and faculties which must meet well-defined targets set by central management. This, in turn, may also disconnect academics as this strategy may stir away from their own interests in engaging in, and sustaining, international partnerships.

According to the interviews conducted at the Chinese university, partnerships without ‘equal status’ are considered unsustainable. As a senior member of the university’s leadership team recalls when asked about their experience (Q4), the perceived status among partner institutions determines the success or failure of bilateral partnerships and multilateral international networks,

When I first became [*a senior leader at the university*], we established a network with other seven universities . . . Later, one American university dropped out from the network because they think the involved institutions are not in the same league as they are (Interviewee 18, senior leadership member, CNHEI).

The importance of selecting partners with equal status from the outset is of key significance, justifying international league tables as the dominant point of reference. Notably, the strategy of ‘*engaging with the world*’ for the Chinese university is underpinned by the logic of engaging with ‘*world-class universities and disciplines*’. Asked about the meaning of ‘sustainability’ in international partnership building (Q2) in this approach, the former Deputy Director of the university’s International Office replied,

. . . we are not just going global but going global with a focus. So when I left the International Office, I set a goal entitled G50, focusing on 50 institutions ranking top 200 in the global league table, you know, that is to say, we will not develop international partnerships on an ad hoc basis, instead, with a goal and quality, focusing on the world-class universities and disciplines. So basically, we start from scratch, then go global, and now make some breakthrough with a focus on the international partnerships (Interviewee 28, formerly Deputy Director of International Office, CNHEI).

What becomes clear from this statement is that global ranking is considered the major, if not exclusive, reference for comparing and selecting partner institutions of equal quality status and building partnerships ‘from scratch’.

Tightly aligned with central university leadership, the administrative agents strategise, as it were, on behalf of the academic community in the faculties and schools. Regardless of previously ‘sustained’ historical overseas linkages or, indeed, academically motivated preferences, it is the administrators/managers’ vision that informs which international institutions are included or excluded, thus constituting an alternative mapping of strategic relationships. This mapping process is not limited to the central university but involves academic communities in that every faculty or school is expected to establish and sustain a certain number of strategic international partnerships. The following statement shows the ways in which schools are instructed by the central university administration with regard to strategic partnership building,

We have set an agenda that each school has to develop strategic partnerships with 3–5 institutions in a very close manner (Interviewee 29, Deputy Director of International Office, CNHEI).

Perhaps unsurprisingly, such an intra-institutional top-down policy generates challenges in terms of academic engagement ‘on the ground’. Outlining his previous experiences with international partnerships in response to Q4, the former

Deputy Director of the International Office reflects on how the ambitious strategic approach was met with some disengagement within the school-based academic community:

Speaking of our School, I think we got a very good platform here, which is the language. We have a bunch of foreign languages like Germany, French etc. We really can do a great job. Of course, I cannot do much work due to my role, but I did push a little bit of the partnership with X University. For the rest, I do hope the faculty in this school could engage in it. Unfortunately, I feel everybody is busy with their own business. It would've failed if we had got this programme because not many people are able to or willing to do that (Interviewee 28, former Deputy Director of International Office, CNHEI).

It becomes evident from the above that unavailability, lack of ability and willingness among faculty staff could make international partnerships stagnate by shutting partners out. While the university may succeed in strategising the way in which partner institutions are selected, there is no indication that the recognition of mutual academic expertise, interests, values, or visions are built into this strategy. The 'intrusion' of central institutional power into sometimes well-established academic network building processes and the success of this centralised matchmaking strategy are frequently questioned in the academic 'heartland'. For example, and asked about their experience with international partnerships (Q4), a Professor in Science shares the following anecdote,

I have visited UK with the vice-chancellor . . . but discovered that there is no interest that two professors share and thus like to move forward (Interviewee 20, Professor in Biochemistry, Associate Head of School, CNHEI).

A similar and equally representative testament to the absence of interest 'on the ground' is observed by the following academic interviewee,

There is no way that partnerships can sustain if there is no academics who shared the vision and interest on the ground, even if the university leaders visit [partners] abroad and establish the relationships between the institutions (Interviewee 16, Professor in Education, Associate Head of School, CNHEI).

In this sense, without the individual academics or academic communities sharing a similar commitment, interest or vision at each institution, the strategic approach to developing 'sustainable' partnerships turns out to be a mere illusion and is bound to fail from the outset.

Discussion and conclusion

More than a decade ago, Kehm and Teichler (2007, 270) observed a growing influence on international activities coming from the 'periphery' of international higher education institutions, i.e. university senior and middle management, international ('engagement') offices, as well as administrative and operational support services. Stating that these 'peripheral' actors are 'trying more than before to shape the international profile of higher education institutions', they questioned the consequences these strategies would have on universities' traditional 'heartland' (i.e. academics engaged in international scholarship, research and education). As our research findings indicate, and seen against the backdrop of growing managerialism in neo-liberal higher education, one can observe

a clear reversal of ‘heartlands’ and ‘peripheries’ within the HEIs investigated in this study. Drawing on our interviews with academic and non-academic stakeholders in both China and UK, there are clear indications that former institutional ‘peripheries’ (in Kehm and Teichlers’ diction) exert an increased influence on international activities, in particular, when it comes to strategising international inter-institutional partnerships from the ‘top’ and laying out what ‘sustainability’ means in this context. It is also clear to see that these strategic decisions primarily serve institutional self-interest and are aligned with wider national political and economic ‘targets’ (UK) and ‘action plans’ (China) that underpin the future direction of international HE partnership building. For the UK HEI featuring in this study, this means keeping up with growing pressures caused by neoliberal marketisation and massification in a competitive Anglophone context, where ‘sustainability’ seems to be reduced to securing financial income and viability. As for the Chinese university, the key sustainable strategy has been to develop, ‘from scratch’ and ‘with a focus’, a fine selection of top-ranking international (predominantly ‘western’) partner institutions. While this strategy promises reputational growth, it neglects prior, often long-established, international connections and risks exclusion from international networks when highly ambitious quality standards are not met. In both cases, the largely inward-looking and self-serving strategies of international partnership building seem to achieve ‘sustainability’ only partially, in financial or reputational terms, and do not account for the human dimensions of building ‘sustainable’ partnerships, for example, based on mutual interests and trust or interpersonal relationships (Ma and Montgomery 2021). Indeed, they appear to diverge significantly from the very essence of internationalisation as a processual and values-based collaborative venture that requires time and continuous work to create meaningful exchange, mutual benefits, capacity building, or the appreciation of cultural, professional or disciplinary diversity (Bamberger, Morris, and Yemini 2019; Knight 2014).

While the general strategic trend towards fewer but more ‘substantial’ international partnerships seems appropriate at first glance and has been implemented by the universities represented in this study, it also runs the risk of reducing agency and diversity and reinforcing already existing inequalities within the global HE landscape more widely. Besides the key partnership parameters of reputation, ranking and financial gain, increased selectiveness in terms of knowledge, disciplinary expertise or epistemic culture may also lead to exclusion and potentially lost opportunities in developing more authentic and sustainable international partnerships ‘elsewhere’. Seen from a current perspective, and considering emerging evidence on the impact of Covid-19 on universities worldwide, Marinoni and de Wit (2020) reckon that, despite some positive effects the crisis may have in terms of strengthening international partnerships, the pandemic is likely to further amplify already deep-seated inequalities between universities worldwide, particularly between the global ‘North’ and the global ‘South’. Hence, the building of meaningful HE partnerships with universities in so-called developing countries beyond financial, reputational, or neo-colonial objectives would be both worthwhile and timely, particularly in view of the wider Sustainable Development Agenda outlined by the United Nations General Assembly (UN 2015).

Going beyond the bulk of research focusing on ‘best practice’ in *inter*-institutional partnership building (e.g. Chou 2012), our research also problematises the growing sense of inequality and exclusion that seemingly strategic and sustainable international

partnership building creates *intra*-institutionally. Reflecting on our findings, academic staff at both the UK and Chinese university repeatedly express their sense of exclusion or disconnection from ‘top-down’ or ‘artificial’ partnership developments, often resulting in losing interest ‘on the ground’ or generating feelings of professional inadequacy or stagnation. These findings resonate with Turner and Robson’s (2009) preliminary research, according to which growing centralisation and managerialism within HEIs have negative implications on how academics conceive a university’s internationalisation strategy and often struggle to define their role and engagement therein. Here, the building of partnerships, however, well-intended and well-strategised, primarily seems to serve institutional marketing, branding and profile building, and gradually moves away from the often complex inter-personal and professional relationships developed and valued by the ‘academic heartland’. To reiterate this point through the eyes of one participant, ‘... *you make anything you want out of inter-university cooperation, but you will fail as a university if you don’t do it at the level of individual academics*’ (Interviewee 3, UKHEI).

More profoundly, perhaps, the gradual inversion of, and tensions between, universities’ ‘heartlands’ and ‘peripheries’ in the process of international partnership building is indicative of the overall changing nature of academics’ professional identities and their sense of belonging, autonomy, and agency in the face of growing neoliberal managerialism in HE. In such a climate, and regardless of age, gender, experience or position, academics have to constantly negotiate their roles of being an agent of change, whose ethical dispositions and values (e.g. towards internationalisation) become integral part of an institution or being a subject of compliance who adjusts to the rules they are expected to play by (Enright, Alfrey, and Rynne 2017). Drawing on our findings, there is perhaps a third position of ‘tacit resistance’ in the way that academics simply lose interest and disengage entirely with international partnership projects or leave it to those considered to be more ‘reliable’ in delivering them. Due to such a decline of confidence, interests and engagement among academic stakeholders, the strategic approach to sustainable international partnerships can easily fall into becoming an institutional imaginary, or, as Hayhoe, Pan, and Zha (2013) argue, the failure to address ‘fundamental human needs’ is unlikely to sustain collaboration.

Not least, and corresponding with the previous point, increasingly selective and exclusive approaches to strategic international partnership building may also jeopardise many universities’ attempts to internationalise ‘comprehensively’ and ‘at home’, that is, to embed international and intercultural dimensions into all operational areas, and particularly in developing formal and informal ‘international’ curricula across domestic learning environments (Beelen and Jones 2015). There is strong evidence to suggest that academic staff involvement in international collaborations and partnerships, facilitated through either physical or virtual mobility (Beelen and Jones 2015; Mittelmeier et al. 2020), is a key ingredient for fostering more comprehensive, authentic and effective approaches to internationalisation within and beyond HEIs. Yet, with the growing lack of engagement and sense of responsibility in international collaboration, staff development and capacity building in view of ‘internationalisation at home’ is likely to weaken.

Reflecting on our extensive interviews with non/academic staff at two universities in China and UK, we recognise that our research only allows a mere glimpse into the complex dynamics and shifting power relations within international partnership building

in higher education on a wider global scale. However, and having sketched out the political and economic contexts in two major national HE ‘players’ – China and the UK, it highlights ongoing trends which may be indicative of the future directions of international engagement and partnership developments more widely. Having explored some of the contradictions that emerge between HEIs’ ‘peripheries’ and ‘academic heartland’, we have argued that the success or failure of ‘sustainable’ international HE partnerships relies on the sound workings of both *inter-* and *intra-*institutional relations which ought to be less driven by ‘strategic’ power rationales, but, ideally, seek out more authentic, collegiate and inclusive forms of engagement. As such, the paper contributes to an ongoing, important, and arguably greater, conversation to be had around what ‘sustainability’ actually means in international higher education, particularly in currently challenging and uncertain global contexts.

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