

International university partnerships: How the university shapes the partnership (0345)

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### **Abstract**

This paper's purpose to provide a better understanding of international university partnerships. It hopes to clarify some misconceptions of what partnership are by explaining the great diversity of partnerships. It also aims to create a clearer picture of who is doing what in terms of partnership creation and how those different actors lead to different partnership types and results. By using semi-structured interviews, this paper blends strategic management theory with practical application to shed light on the variety of partnerships. The findings indicate that partnerships are shaped by university structure and are often quite different in terms of stability, form and results at the central administration and the faculty levels.

### **Objectives and background**

This study explores international university partnerships. For this paper, international university partnerships is based on Beerkens's (2002) definition as partnerships being bilateral, indefinite agreements for co-ordination purposes that may be classified by intensity. Knight (2011) classified that intensity into: development co-operation, exchange and commercial trade (p. 23). Development co-operation is where universities agree to work with each but do little together. Exchange and commercial trade partnerships allow for student and faculty exchanges. Commercial trade partnerships include double/joint degree programmes and foreign franchise agreements.

While international university partnerships are not new (Jie, 2010), numbers have greatly expanded in the past twenty years. Reliable statistics do not exist on partnership numbers, but it is estimated that British universities are involved in the tens of thousands of partnerships between them. The reasons for this are complex and not entirely understood. However, they may be generalised. With the growth of mass higher education and the decrease in government funding, universities are forced to become more entrepreneurial in search for funding (Hodson and Thomas, 2001). This motives universities to internationalise (Scott, 1998). A common method for universities to internationalise is to form partnerships with foreign counterparts.

Yet, despite this vast recent increase, international partnerships are only an emerging interest in academic scholarship. Partnerships are often mentioned as a type of internationalisation (Altbach and Knight, 2007, McBurnie and Ziguras, 2007, Taylor, 2010). When partnerships are the central

focus, the papers are often biographical narratives (e.g. Shore and Groen, 2009). Other prominent works came from Heffernan and Poole (2004, 2005) on what causes partnerships to go poorly or well. Partnerships tend to fail if their champions change positions or the partnerships are not mutually beneficial (Heffernan and Poole, 2004). However, partnerships work when strong working relationships are developed and an intense tie is created among partners (Heffernan and Poole, 2005).

While giving great insight to partnerships, these papers do not analyse reasons behind the partnerships or how they fit into the university. In order to do this, this paper addresses the basic research question of: What types of partnerships are universities forming? To analyse this question properly, it is necessary to determine the motivating forces behind the development of international university partnerships. Thus, the question can be broken into the following sub questions:

- a) Why are they being formed?
- b) Who are the key actors?
- c) Where do they operate?

### **Theoretical and Conceptual Framework**

The paper draws on several conceptual frameworks for understanding partnerships. The theoretical concepts derive from strategic management and refer to organisational culture and internal power relationships (DiMaggio and Powell, 1983). This, however, is adapted to universities as university organisation is more decentralised than many organisations (Musselin, 2006). It is often the case where academics have more loyalty to their faculty or their academic discipline than the university. The faculties have little or no contact with each other and have great autonomy of action to control their own destiny (Enders and Musselin, 2008).

### **Methodology**

The paper draws on 20 semi-structured interviews of academics and central administrative managers who are directly involved in partnerships of various types between British and Korean universities. The administrative managers comprise mid and senior level management whose responsibilities include international partnerships. The interview "is to obtain descriptions of the lived world of the interviewees with respect to interpretations of the meaning of the described phenomena" (Kvale, 1996, p. 30-1). Their intent is to:

- Be able to reveal and explore nuanced descriptions of the participants' viewpoints;
- Provoke descriptions of specific, not generalities, situations and actions;

(Kvale, 1996, Cohen et al., 2011).

## **Findings**

In response to the interviews, this study found that the reasons for partnerships conform to the university's basic organisational structure. With this in mind, this study's results show that the types of partnerships being formed are quite different depending on where in the university they are taking place in the central administration or at the faculty level.

### **Partnerships in the central administration**

Partnerships at the university level tend to be either development co-operation or exchange agreements. The agreements are negotiated and agreed on by professional staff, who are hired based on their marketing and negotiation skills as opposed to being experts in academia. Their primary concerns are to form agreements with foreign universities with good reputations. These reputations come from the various university rankings. If a university can form an agreement with a reputable university, it is thought to increase its own reputation and consequently increasing its funding. Since these partnerships are often business decisions based on reputation, they often do not last. Another problem is the reciprocal nature of the exchange agreements may not meet market needs. These partnerships often get relegated to co-operation agreements or cease to exist. While some partnerships originating from the central administration do become successful, these partnerships often do last and are less successful.

### **Partnership in the faculties**

In contrast to those in created in the central administration, partnerships in the faculties tend to be more stable. These partnerships tend to be exchange or commercial trade partnerships. These are frequently created by individual academics who see partnerships as a method to fulfil academic needs or specifically designated academics in the faculty. The exchange agreements are often created with the curriculum in mind. Thus, these exchanges tend to create a better reputation among the students creating a longer term demand leading to greater stability.

## **Discussion**

This paper highlights the differences found in partnerships with the university's organisation structure. It shows how the difference between job functions between central administrators and academics at the faculty level creates differences in the partnership dynamics. In addition, it indicates that the partnership intensity levels that Knight (2011) developed is a useful classification system for partnerships. There however, remains more to be done to gain a fuller understanding of international university partnerships. Further research is needed to understand the impacts these

partnerships have on the university. This may allow for the ability to create more value from the partnerships.

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