

122 The operationalisation of collaborative academic practice

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Research Domains

Academic practice, work, careers and cultures (AP)

Abstract

Collaborations are a key feature of contemporary practice in higher education, involving work across multiple boundaries. For those involved in their operationalisation, expertise is demonstrated in the ability to navigate complex boundary zones, often outside of 'traditional' university structures and processes. With calls being made to bring the experiences and motivations of those working in the 'third space' into the open, this presentation discusses the operationalisation of the collaborative academic practice associated with TNE partnerships, and introduces a new model for analysing boundary work, The Collaborative Work Model (CWM).

Full paper

Transnational Education (TNE), defined by the British Council as "the delivery of degrees in a country other than where the awarding institution is based" (Wake, 2018, p. 5) plays a significant part in contemporary higher education policy (Yencken, Croucher, Elliott and Locke 2021). It represents one of the ways in which higher education is diversifying internationally, resulting in new spaces for university work (Clegg 2008), challenging the maintenance of perceived boundaries and identities as interdependence, collaboration and engagement across groups and institutions become increasingly influential (Henkel 2007).

TNE is made up of several different types of provision, including partnerships (Emery and Worton 2014; HE Global, 2016). In the UK, these partnerships between a UK HEI and an overseas HE institution provide valuable revenue to the UK HE sector, but, it is essential to note, regarding TNE partnerships as simply an income generator seriously devalues the reputation of the higher education sector. They enable universities to enhance their institutional reputation (Heffernan, Wilkins and Butt 2018) and contribute to claims for social justice and equality of opportunity in higher education (UNESCO 2023). However, despite multiple, complex factors to consider, Wagstaff (2013) considers that not enough is known about what contributes to their success or failure. Commenting on this lack of knowledge, Yenckel et al (2021:13) suggest ...'it is not so much the mode of provision (for example, international branch campus, franchised or validated provision, and wholly online learning) that matters, but the nature of the partnerships and the relationships formed and sustained over time [*italics in original*].

The purpose of this presentation is twofold. Firstly it answers the question 'what are the experiences and motivations of academics responsible for operationalising TNE partnerships'. Often called academic liaison, or academic link tutors these individuals represent an excellent example of members of the university workforce who operate in collaborative, hybridized, boundary spanning or 'third space' environments (Messenger and Bloisi 2020; Whitchurch 2013). However, Whitchurch (2022) has indicated that far less is known about academics in boundary spanning roles than their 'non-academic' counterparts. Secondly, it aims to contribute more generally to discussions relating to the university workforce and calls for the examination of the experiences and practices of those working in a 'third space' to be drawn into the open and examined (Hall 2022) because as Sugrue, Englund, Solbrekke, and Fosslund (2018) have argued, those in third space now require the "equally exciting and frightening ability to service as activist advocates within universities, to model leadership, to advocate for sustainable innovations, to be strategic, to be politically aware, aware of values, of power and positioning within the organization."

Academic link tutors are key to partnership success 'after the ink dries'. They are responsible for managing the 'increasingly complex operational and academic requirements of TNE

successfully and to ensure quality' (Henderson, Barnett and Barrett 2017:14), working closely on a day-to-day basis with external university partners and internal university departments, spanning functions, departments, institutions and international borders. A TNE partnership is just one of the collaborative endeavours that characterise the contemporary university, and Daniels (2011) suggests that whereas professional expertise is generally anticipated to develop 'vertically' over time as new professional knowledge and competences are developed and practitioners reach a higher 'level', for those involved in collaborations, expertise is also developed when practitioners operate 'horizontally'. As debates amass relating to the future of the university workforce, and the artificial divide often existing between 'academic' and non-academic' roles, this publication has a significant and critical purpose by conceptualising the working environment of academic link tutors as a boundary zone, so providing new ways of interpreting other university collaborations and the professional practices involved.

This presentation makes use of data obtained from organisational data and in-depth interviews with 10 highly experienced academic link tutors from one university to identify their experiences and motivations. It presents a new model for analysing activities in the boundary zone where TNE partnerships are operationalised. This model (Collaborative Work Model; CWM) will also be useful for all situations which require collaborative university work, and for revealing the experiences and motivations of those involved.

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