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# Elephants in the Parlour

Theme: Institutional partnerships: what's the real value?

[Dr Dave Burnapp](#)

## ***‘Strategic Implications of International Collaborations in Higher Education’***

- This paper describes three unresolved issues which have emerged during a HEA funded National Teaching Fellowship project: *‘Strategic Implications of International Collaborations in Higher Education’*
- Internationalization is characterised by increasing complexity as more forms of collaboration are devised during a period of rapid world-wide economic, political, and technical change.
  - an interface of expectations from different cultures of learning
  - the requirements of distinct structures of administration,
  - each type of collaboration impacts stakeholders within institutions differently, including students and staff

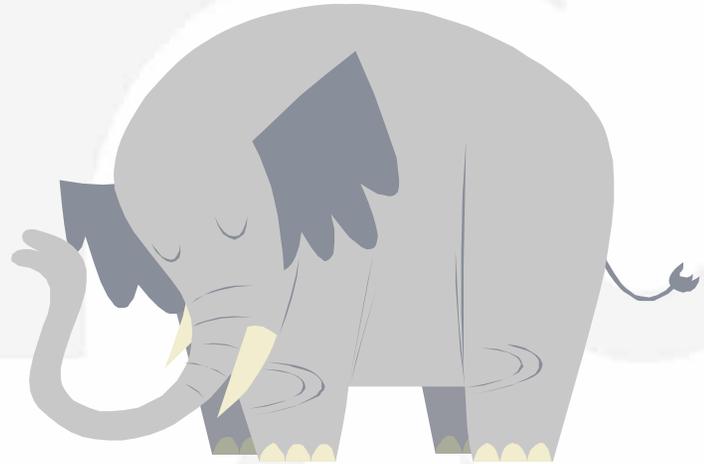


- This is the need this project addresses, hence the aim is to research existing collaborations in order to produce resources which will better enable HE institutions to achieve successful outcomes in future collaborations.
- The project will produce practical materials which will:
  - enable institutions to anticipate likely requirements necessary;
  - warn of possible pitfalls;
  - enable institutions to exploit the potential opportunities they may find.



## ***Elephant in the parlour***

- This idiom which is often used to refer to a difficulty, which everyone seems to be aware of, but about which little has been done.

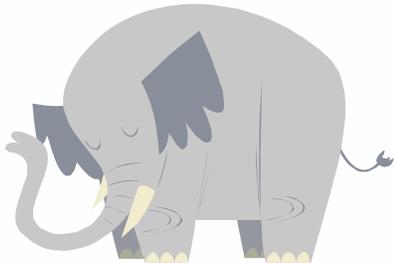


## ***Aspect One: Growth of transnational education***

- ‘Transnational education’ refers to programmes where students do not move across borders but follow a course provided by a foreign institution or agency, e.g. HND level courses validated by UK-based organisations such as SQA or Edexcel.
- Another example is delivering programmes by distance learning, perhaps in collaboration with a local partner.
- In order to ensure that quality is maintained, institutions and agencies involved in such provision must establish rigorous procedures concerning: due diligence; assuring of academic standards and quality; supporting collaborative partners in areas such as staff development; student admission and support; and external examining.

# The elephant in the parlour

In research with students who followed a transnational programme in China before moving on to top-up courses in the UK, different aspects of student transition were identified (Burnapp and Zhao 2009). One of these transitions relates to *epistemology*.



Students on transnational programmes need to make a transition from one culture of learning to another. It is easy to assume that this *academic* adaptation to the new course requirements will be less daunting than for students who physically move.



- The students and teachers in China genuinely believed they were delivering authentic UK style courses, also the correct procedures set out in guidelines had been followed by the validating agencies and the recruiting universities and their collaborative partners.
- **BUT**
  - “Cultures of education are likely to reflect to some extent the prevalent ideologies which are exhibited daily in such things as how the news is reported (for example whether several views are presented or just one official view), or how decisions are made in workplaces (using either horizontal or vertical decision making structures), or expectations of whose voices have the right to be heard in certain scenarios.” Burnapp and Zhao 2009



- They may genuinely attempt to follow curricula based on:
  - a discursive approach to learning,
  - a presentation of varying viewpoints drawn from autonomously researching different sources,
  - the need for critical evaluation leading to a personal evaluative stance and so on,
- but if these activities are carried out in a setting where, put simply, there is an expectation that most questions have an answer and that answer can be learnt, then the fundamental principles of this system of education might remain absent.

## ***Aspect Two: Institutional Strategies***

- An essential first step for staff considering engaging in any form of collaboration is to examine how their plans would fit within their institutional strategies.
- It is also worth deliberating whether an institution's declared international strategy remains only an aspirational statement or whether aspirations are becoming realised and are having resources allocated to them.

### 3 Stages of strategy: Middlehurst & Woodfield (2007)

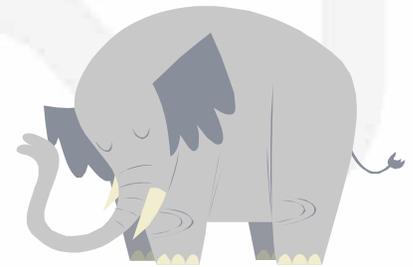
1. *'International activity'*, with activities which could be limited or short-term, usually set up by small groups, which may not be connected to other initiatives in the institution.
2. *'International strategy'*, the emerging activities are often accompanied by the establishment of an International Office.
3. *'Internationalization process'* involves integration, so now the university probably has a clearly articulated strategy, clearly defined roles in a structure including senior management, and a detailed procedure for creating and monitoring collaborations.

## Other differences in strategy

- A separate movement for many institutions involves what can be thought of as changes in *ethos*, or of paradigm (Luker 2008): e.g. a shift from internationalization ‘abroad’, towards a growing focus on internationalization ‘at home’ activities.
- Another shift in focus can be seen as involving a change in *ideological stance*, reflecting a distinction between what has been labelled a marketisation discourse compared with a discourse of sustainability or of development education (Caruana and Spurling 2007).

# The elephant in the parlour

- The elephant in the parlour concerning this aspect of collaboration concerns the dangers of creating a conflict between staff with different perspectives; for example between those charged with implementing a top-down strategy and the bottom-up champions of internationalization, or between staff who are motivated by a different ethos or ideological stance.



## ***Aspect Three: Internationalisation of home students***

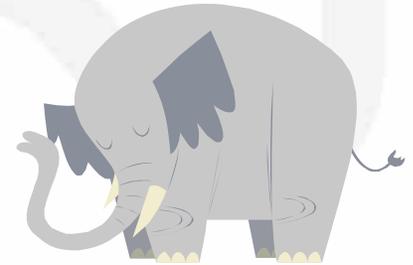
- Many institutions have adopted a declared intention to increase their internationalization 'at home' activities.
- This is justified by an intention to encourage a global perspective amongst all institutional stakeholders, in particular the home students.

### **BUT**

One recurring difficulty reported concerns how to implement intentions to internationalize the curriculum, another concerns how to implement aspirations such as 'valuing diversity' and 'achieving cross-cultural capability'.

# The elephant in the parlour

- The elephant in the parlour for this aspect of internationalisation refers to the disappointing degree to which home students are adopting an internationalised stance:
  - the extent that home students integrate with international students;
  - and the extent that home students demonstrate a willingness to themselves be internationally mobile.





- ‘Broadening Our Horizons’ (UKCOSA 2004) found that a failure to mix home and international students, in both social and academic settings, was a recurrent theme.
- Turning to the willingness of UK students to take part in mobility schemes it should be noted that there is now a European level target that: *‘in 2020, at least 20 per cent of those graduating in the European Higher Education Area should have had a study or training period abroad’*.
- It is true that more students go to other English speaking countries than participate on Erasmus programmes, but if this is in part related to a desire to remain within a monolingual comfort zone then this does not demonstrate inquisitiveness and a desire to experience alternative worlds.

## *Ways forward*

It is important to underline that these difficulties relate to deeply rooted aspects of thought:

- the first aspect related to how people are led by previous experiences to make certain assumptions about the nature of knowledge and hence the routes which should be followed to learning;
- the second related to the radically different expectations of how things should be done by comparing the attributes of entrepreneurs and administrators;
- the third related to difficulties in engendering what was described a 'internationalised stance' amongst home students.

# Transnational programmes

- Firstly it must be recognised by that these differences exist, even though they may not appear on the surface of the daily activities of teaching and learning, or even become apparent in assessments.
- Managers of transnational programmes must accept that time and resources will need to be allocated to resolve such issues.
  - It is easy, to explain to partner institutions what components a portfolio assessment should contain, but it is far harder to get the staff and the students in the partner institution actually to embrace the concept and practice of reflective learning which is the epistemology on which the use of portfolios is based.

# Institutional strategies

- To accommodate and balance different perspectives (top-down and bottom-up), different narratives of the organisation, and different ideological stances, one possible solution is a hub model to ensure coordination and communication which avoids central control.
- Other institutions claim to have ‘champions’ on institutional level committees, but it is unlikely that even these can accommodate ante-narratives alongside the official narrative of the organisation.
- To avoid the danger of over-claiming and under-performing, it is essential that each item in a strategy is supported by a description of how achievements will be monitored, and that these descriptions include qualitative as well as quantitative instruments.



# Internationalisation of home students

- Emphasis should be placed on internationalisation of the curriculum, guidance for which is now emerging, in particular in Jones (2010).
- The National Union of Students has now produced a strategic framework concerning internationalisation of students' unions which sets out an intention of internationalising the experience of all students, and within this to seek greater opportunities for home and international students to mix.
- It remains to be seen if this barrier will remain intractable.
- Similarly it is encouraging that Students' Unions are now playing a strategic role concerning increasing student mobility.