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How can sustainable international higher education (HE)
partnerships thrive post-2020?

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Abstract

This dissertation was inspired by the huge impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on the area of international strategy, partnerships, that has formed an important part of my professional life. The global pandemic emerged at a time when the political and economic context for UK universities was already challenging, but, despite the disruption to international education, the response to the crisis has shown opportunities in recalibrating the motives and methods of partnership building. It has also shown the strong resilience of individuals in the HE sector globally.

This study aims to explore how those working in international collaboration see the impact of COVID-19 on partnerships in general and specifically how they perceive successful models of partnerships post-COVID, balancing different strategic aims. The results show a need for prioritising virtual forms of collaboration, such as COIL, while reducing dependency on physical mobility. There is also a need for partnerships based on equity, diversity and inclusion, and on the UN Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) as long-term rationales to solving global challenges. This will require institutions to emphasise their social and ethical missions in the context of a UK sector which is marked by competition and commercialisation. International collaboration is best served by having

ownership for projects and partnerships at faculty level. At an interpersonal level, deliberate strategies are needed to enhance relationships in a partnership.

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Glossary

Belt and Road Initiative (BRI)

The policy introduced by the Chinese government in 2013 with the aim of connecting Asia with Africa and Europe via land and maritime networks along six corridors. Its objective is regional integration, increasing trade and stimulating economic growth. It was formerly known as the One Belt One Road (OBOR).

Brexit

The departure of the United Kingdom from the European Union, which took place on 31 January 2020.

Collaborative Online International Learning (COIL)

An educational approach that provides students from different geographical and linguacultural backgrounds opportunities to attain intercultural competence through online collaborative projects.

Comprehensive Internationalisation

A form of internationalisation that involves commitment and action to infuse and integrate international, global and comparative content and perspective throughout the teaching, research and service missions of higher education (Hudzik 2011).

COVID-19

The disease caused by SARS-CoV-2, the coronavirus that emerged in December 2019 bringing about a global pandemic.

European Community Action Scheme for the Mobility of University Students (ERASMUS)

The European Union (EU) student exchange programme originally established in 1987 funding education, training, youth and sport.

Global North

In broad terms, those countries found mainly, but not exclusively, in the northern hemisphere, characterised by high levels of economic development. Post-colonial approaches contest the North–South binary.

Global South

Broadly the countries of Latin America, Asia, Africa, and Oceania that are low-income and often politically or culturally marginalised.

Higher Education (HE)

Tertiary education at universities and colleges which normally includes undergraduate and postgraduate study.

International Association of Universities (IAU)

A global association of higher education institutions and organisations from around the world.

Internationalisation at Home (IaH)

'The purposeful integration of international and intercultural dimensions into the formal and informal curriculum for all students within domestic learning environments' (Beelen and Jones 2015).

Internationalisation of the Curriculum (IoC)

'The incorporation of international, intercultural and/or global dimensions into the content of the curriculum, as well as the learning outcomes, assessment tasks, teaching methods, and support services of a program of study' (Leask 2015)

Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs)

The collection of 17 interlinked United Nations goals designed to be the blueprint to achieve more sustainable future, addressing the global challenges of poverty, inequality, climate change, environmental degradation, peace and justice.

United Nations (UN)

An international organization founded in 1945, currently made up of 193 member states.

United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organisation (UNESCO)

A specialised agency of the United Nations aimed at promoting world peace and security through international cooperation in education, the sciences, and culture.

1. Introduction

The global COVID-19 pandemic that arose in early 2020 disrupted every aspect of life. In education worldwide UNESCO (2020a) reported 1.37 billion students had been affected by school and university closures by March 2020. More than twelve months after the pandemic started, we may no longer be in a heightened emergency, rather a 'protracted crisis' (UNESCO 2020c) in which inequalities have been widened. The impact on global higher education is multi-faceted, its long-term consequences difficult to measure at this point, occurring against a backdrop of other significant global and national events such as the UK exit from the EU.

As Sutton et al (2012) suggest, international partnerships have become part of key strategy and core philosophy for internationalisation in higher education. The nature of international partnerships varies, as Alter and Hage (1993) describe, some having transactional features while others are more relationship based. The Global Dialogue (IEASA 2014) concluded that partnerships should be founded on ethical and equal principles, which was given further emphasis by the UN 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development (UN General Assembly 2015). These are embraced by many international HE networks as a sustainable blueprint for new innovative international collaborative pathways (Ruiz-Mallen and Heras 2020).

These objectives, however, run counter to the neoliberal forces of the last 30 years (Kumi et al 2014) and therefore pose strategic dilemmas for institutions, who operate in a setting where marketisation and commercial imperatives are compelling. Support for the SDGs is not universal as some argue that the SDG agenda is prompting a global technocracy under the pretext of environmentalism (Newman, A. 2020).

The development of international partnerships is therefore of great significance to the sector in renewing its relevance as a positive social force. As Stein (2017) points out, even before the advent of COVID-19, higher education is increasingly called upon to play a central role in solving challenges in today's complex and volatile world. International collaborations are a key part of that endeavour. This study therefore aims to provide a timely advance in knowledge in the current global circumstances and to inform the professional practice of the author and a wider professional audience.

This direct research aims to explore how professionals working in HE internationalisation view the impact of COVID-19 on international partnerships in general and specifically how they perceive successful models of partnerships post-COVID. The study therefore aims to reflect the nuances and conflicts in professional roles that balance different strategic aims. I intend to highlight the cultural comparisons in the reported experiences and evaluate them against the concepts of hidden and null curriculum. Eisner (1994) defines the hidden curriculum as not stated or written, whether it is intended or not, while the null curriculum refers to what students may not have the opportunity to learn. This may apply equally to the unwritten way in which each institution approaches the Internationalisation of the Curriculum (IoC), influenced by cultural and institutional factors.

I will also assess the relevance of the study to Bourdieu's notion of habitus. Bourdieu (1994) defines habitus as a property of actors (whether individuals, groups or institutions) which comprises a system of dispositions and which influences future expectations. It is contextualised by other concepts of field, capital and practice; the notion of field is seen as a social space in which interactions, transactions and events take place.

In order to address the objectives of the research, I formulated the following research questions:

1. What is the impact of COVID-19 on the development of international higher education partnerships in the short, medium and long term?
2. How do the effects of COVID-19 interact with other social, political and education forces?
3. To what extent do the selected case studies provide a model of international collaboration that will meet UN SDGs, set out in '2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development'?
4. What principles, approaches and strategies will enable SDG-compliant international partnerships to thrive and be resilient long-term post-COVID?

As the study is intended to make sense of the perceptions of participants, a Social Constructivist approach will inform the study. The study will be based on a subjectivist epistemology, whereby meaning is reached through cognitive processing, informed by interactions with participants. My beliefs reflect a relativist ontology, recognising the situation has multiple realities and is socially constructed (Patton 2002).

2. Literature review

Internationalisation of higher education is seen as a response within the sector to globalisation (Kälvemark and Van der Wende 1997) and, according to Bamberger et al (2019), is influenced by the global political, economic and social forces of each period. They identify two contrasting modes of internationalisation; one based on competitive and economic approaches, the other aligned with academic and humanitarian rationales (Bamberger et al 2019). As Bourdieu (1986) asserts, higher education institutions are fields of power with varying claims of relevance

and value. They develop strategies to locate themselves through their tacitly developed practices, or habitus.

This literature review will trace the evolution of international HE partnerships until 2020 and analyse the factors in the success of such partnerships. The impact of the sustainability agenda and geopolitical events, such as the UK's departure from the EU, on international HE partnerships will be assessed.

The COVID-19 pandemic that emerged in early 2020 prompted a considerable body of literature nationally and internationally, which will be evaluated by their analysis of threats and opportunities to make sense of the differing views of how COVID-19 has impacted the nature of international partnerships. This review therefore aims to analyse critically the variety of perspectives in the literature and to explore whether changes that occurred in 2020 are short-term or have longer reaching consequences. In doing so, the aim is to provide context for the direct research, and to raise questions for further discussion.

(i)   Models of Collaboration

Alter and Hage (1993) describe a continuum with co-operation at the transactional end and collaboration at the high end, with its greater depth of interaction, commitment and complexity. Gray (1989) echoes the nature of collaboration as a long-term integrated process in which parties look jointly for solutions that go beyond their own limited visions. While observing that collaborative ventures are diverse and continually evolving, Altbach and Knight (2007) identify their rationales as falling into categories of social, political, economic and academic. Stier (2010) points to the practice of instrumental motives over educational, while Vincent-Lancrin (2009) observes four often conflicting agendas that internationalisation serves: cultural understanding, competition for talent, revenue generation and capacity building.

(ii)   Evolution of international partnerships

Higher education collaboration in the post-1945 era often followed the dominant models of international development, which assumed that the West should take the leadership role in sharing its technology and knowledge with less developed countries (Stein 2017). In practice, this meant faculty mobility from the Global North to the Global South (Goodwin and Nacht 1991) and a student flow in the opposite direction (Kramer 2009). As Walker (2014) and Stein (2017) point out, this pattern of mobility reflected colonial-era relationships, which has renewed relevance in the current arguments for decolonisation. Jones and de Wit (2014) argue strongly that internationalisation should not be considered any longer in a Westernised, largely English-speaking paradigm.

Van der Wende (2001) identifies mobility of students, staff and programmes as the predominant form of collaboration in international HE, and as de Wit (2020) describes, this is largely a quantitatively evaluated process which is the privilege of a relatively small elite group of students and staff. De Wit and Jones (2018) also cite surveys carried out by Universities UK (UUK) which show that affluent students take up most mobility opportunities.

Rudzki (1995) identifies a range of critical factors for successful collaborations, including achieving the buy-in of staff and senior management, having staff with a specific international brief and internationalised professional development. Chan (2004) emphasises partners being committed to the same goals but having complementary skills and expertise and maintaining open, regular communication. Kinser and Green (2009) also focus on faculty buy-in, resourcing and complementary strengths as success factors.

Lanford (2020) argues that global partnerships need to align with the ethical and social missions of higher education as a public good. He also identifies the alignment of motivations and goals between partners as important for success, a point echoed by Beerkens and der Wende (2007) who focus on complementarity and compatibility. Across institutions, Tadaki and Tremewan (2013) argue that the role of international consortia is important to partnerships in providing space to foster broader thinking. Marginson (2011) meanwhile sees consortia as valuable spaces with a progressive vision of global interconnectedness. He also points out the strength of consortia in deliberative and convergent development.

Qiang (2003) asserts that collaboration needs to be fully integrated into the policies of an institution, which reflects the concept of 'comprehensive internationalisation', echoed by De Wit (2009) and Hudzik (2011, 2014). De Wit (2015) sees comprehensive internationalisation as being more inclusive with a focus on curriculum development and learning outcomes rather than mobility for the minority. Townsin and Walsh (2016) argue in the same vein for a model of international curriculum design that is untethered from mobility. More broadly, McAllister-Grande (2018) suggests a return of internationalisation to the earlier humanistic view of a 'door' to further thinking in the field.

Ma and Montgomery (2021) foreground the importance of individuals and interpersonal relationships in sustainable international partnerships against the background of increasingly strategic internationalisation in HE, building on Brandenburg (2016) who argued for the recognition of the human and affective dimensions of partnerships. Hoellerman et al (2008) similarly acknowledged that once collaborations are established, they rely on communication, personal links and emotional factors such as trust.

Hunter et al. (2018) and Eddy (2010) observe that the partnerships facilitated by the EU Erasmus+ scheme are largely initiated by academics and their

departments, which help to develop successful international competencies and disciplinary networks (Klemencic 2017). This focus on interpersonal relationships and 'ground-level' partnerships (Eddy 2010) is reinforced by Kim (2017) who identifies the transnational mobile academic as the key knowledge trader and broker in collaborations. Bordogna (2017) emphasised the importance of the role of 'boundary spanner', first identified by Williams (2002), in building relationships and connecting problems to solutions. The disadvantage of the key role of individuals is that academics are themselves mobile between institutions and interpersonal relationships go beyond organisational boundaries (Levine 2000).

Collaborative Online International Learning (COIL) is an approach that supports comprehensive internationalisation, by combining the four essential ideas in the name of this form of virtual mobility (de Wit 2013), developing interculturally linked classrooms in interdisciplinary ways. It is designed to be integrated comprehensively into the curriculum and is a key element in Internationalisation of the Curriculum (IoC) and Internationalisation at Home (IaH) (Jones 2014).

This means rejecting the deficit view of viewing international students as needing to be integrated with home students (de Vita 2007) and questioning Anglo-centric values for a broader concept of internationalisation (Hudzik 2011), especially in teaching methods and learning outcomes (Leask 2015). Fielden (2007) highlights the concept of global citizenship, which an internationalised curriculum nurtures. Beelen and Jones (2015) also identify the importance of integrating internationalisation into the informal or hidden curriculum. Webb (2005) promotes Internationalisation of the Curriculum (IoC) as embodying openness, tolerance and culturally inclusive behaviour, while Caruana and Ploner (2010) locate this normalised internationalisation within the broader concepts of diversity and inclusion.

The term 'sustainability' is contested, being viewed variously as a dynamic concept, as an ethical imperative or as a heuristic (Wals and Jickling 2002). Wals (2012) sees an increased engagement by universities in re-orienting curriculum and research to models of sustainability. The 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development was launched by the United Nations in 2015 with seventeen Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), specifying education as one of the goals (SDG4), with specific targets (UN General Assembly 2015).

The SDGs are highly debated; Wals in the CSDS 3rd Conference (2021) questions what exactly is need of being sustained and argues that SDGs remain within an extractivist and transmissive paradigm within education. As Wulff (2020) describes, the education community has divergent viewpoints over specific policies. Nevertheless, the 2030 Agenda questions the current system and its structural failures, providing a focus and purpose for universities in pursuit of social, environmental and economic justice (Ivison 2020). By 2020, a significant number of international collaborations in higher education had been underpinned by SDGs but remained far from widespread and the voice of higher education noticeably absent from critical discussions (United Nations 2019).

The focus on sustainability connects with the increased demand within parts of the Global North for the decolonisation of higher education. Silva (2015) identifies the bounded categories forced by European colonisation, which Stein (2017) argues still influences current global political, economic and social relations. McGregor and Hill (2009) attribute economic disparities between regions to the effects of colonial and capitalist global relations. The positioning of Global North countries as benefactors of the Global South has resulted in knowledge production and flows that are Eurocentric (Sidhu 2006). Similarly, according to Findlay et al (2012), international collaboration often embeds cultural dominance and colonial discourses, undermining the moral basis for its promotion of global citizenship.

The principles of African paradigm of Ubuntu and Chinese Confucianism are as less positivistic, Eurocentric and individualistic than the norm in the Global North (Oviawe 2016). Ubuntu locates identity and meaning making within a collective approach rather than an individualistic one, and the relationship between individual and community is reciprocal, interdependent and mutually beneficial. Assié-Lumumba (2016) describes how Eurocentric education is inadequate in the post-colonial African context and re-appropriation of African education using an Ubuntu framework is necessary for renewal.

Attempts to decolonise the curriculum and locate a non-European paradigm have grown since 2015 (Chaudhuri 2016) and have allowed a discussion about cultural narratives (Charles 2019). Impetus for change has been reinforced in many Western countries by the Black Lives Matter movement that gained greater support after the murder of George Floyd (Dar et al. 2020). Pimblott (2020) identifies the problem of white-centred, Eurocentric curriculums and argues that universities remain deeply implicated in the production of broader inequalities. Decolonisation of the curriculum is supported by Collaborative Online International Learning (COIL), which Wimpenny et al (2021) see as promoting knowledge pluralisation through the interaction of diverse learners.

From an ethical perspective, Collins (2012) questions whether institutions in the Global North can enter into equitable collaborations with the Global South, with such a discrepancy in global positioning. Similarly, De Lissovoy (2010) argues that unequal power relationships are unlikely to create equal partnerships and Shahjahan (2013) points to 'colonial realities' that obstruct global relationships. According to George Mwangi (2017), power dynamics are rarely examined but are important in developing a holistic understand of partnerships. Brinkerhoff (2002) identifies equality in decision-making and mutual benefit as key features of partnerships, while Galtung (1980) proposes a conceptual lens of mutuality for

evaluating international partnerships, in contrast to imperialism and exploitation. Orton (2000) argues that partners should assess the power differential and attempt to reduce it, to achieve what Hayhoe (1989) describes as 'a balanced and non-dominating knowledge interaction process' and 'mutual transformation'. George Mwangi (2017) also highlights sensitivity to cultures and value systems as a basis for mutuality in collaboration.

Hagenmeier (2017) adds to the discourse of equitable partnerships by observing that inequalities are often evident when one partner makes a larger financial contribution. At the same time, inequality within a region may be an issue. McKie (2021a) reports the Southern Africa Impact Forum 2021 which expressed concerns about the dominance of South Africa on the African continent.

Ideas of equitable development run directly counter to global currents that have brought to power politicians with a populist-nationalist stance in Brazil, Turkey, the UK and from 2016-20 in the US. Worthington (2018) identifies the focus of such administrations as being within the national boundary. Altbach and de Wit (2017) similarly point to the rise of nationalism limiting international education, predicting that the commercialised aspects of internationalisation may survive while the more humanist models, such as Internationalisation at Home (IaH) and development of global citizenship, will suffer. In the same vein, the Forum for the Future (2019) points to the intentional divisiveness of nationalism as a threat to SDGs and global solutions. It identifies specifically Brexit and the US-China trade war as endangering a globalist approach. It argues that nationalist governments discourage the collective action that is required to meet sustainability challenges. Douglass also highlights the consequence of neo-nationalism for universities as increasing government control of institutional governance and management in McLemee (2021).

In the UK context, Brexit has damaged the capability of universities to develop international partnerships, such as in losing EU research funding between 2015-2018 (Royal Society 2018). Confusion and uncertainty over the impact of the UK's exit from the EU has affected EU-UK collaborations (Mitchell 2020). The beginning of the 2021 academic year saw a 59% drop in EU students placed at a British university while non-EU international students rose by just 7% (McKie 2021). In January 2021 the UK left the Erasmus+ scheme and introduced its own scheme, Turing. Jones (2021) notes it will not embed Internationalisation in the Curriculum (IoC) through mutual recognition of study nor cover inward mobility.

On a political level Brexit has been justified by the promotion of 'Global Britain'. It is evident that the empire was excised from histories of 'Global Britain', in a way that denies the significance of decolonisation (Saunders 2020), contrary to social forces towards rethinking deep-seated colonial influences. Vucetic (2020) notes that a former Prime Minister has identified exceptionalism in the 'Global Britain' policy.

Cai (2011) argues that the main motivation for China's increasing internationalisation has been to raise the quality of higher education and to improve its international competitiveness and standing. Lo and Pan (2020) highlight China's aim as the gaining of soft power, which Nye (2004) defines as the ability of a country to get what it wants through attraction rather than coercion or payment, arising from that country's culture, political ideals and policies including education (ibid.). Meanwhile Peters (2020) connects the development of higher education in China with the 2013 Belt and Road Initiative (BRI), which not only emphasises social and cultural exchange but also the knowledge transfer through digital infrastructure with large parts of Central and South Asia and Africa.

The advent of COVID-19 in 2020 had a dramatic and immediate effect on global higher education, causing the closure of campuses and the transfer of teaching and learning onto online platforms (Tesar 2020).

Gyimah in Universities in Crisis (2020) poses the central question, whether COVID-19 is a storm to be weathered or an opportunity for innovation. The pandemic has elicited a wide range of responses in the literature, from ideas of reimagining (Newman, J. 2020, Wimpenny et al 2021) and the pandemic as a watershed (Leask and Green 2020), to an existential questioning of whether internationalisation in HE can survive coronavirus (Helms 2020).

The literature can therefore be described by its identification of threats and opportunities deriving from the pandemic, with the effects observed at global, national and institutional levels.

a) Threats

On a global scale, a major threat has been identified in the reduced access to education and the widening of inequalities this has brought (UNESCO 2020), reflected also in the analysis of Altbach and de Wit (2020) who foresee greater social inequality with the poorest parts of society suffering worst from the pandemic. An IAU survey (Marinoni et al 2020) shows that 90% of universities reported a decrease in international student mobility from COVID-19. Most universities globally also reported a weakening of international partnerships due to COVID-19.

The potential for serious financial damage to the sector has been emphasised, based on the prevailing model for financing higher education in the UK, outlined

by Hillman (2020), whereby the shortfall in research funding is cross subsidised by international student fees. This model, while broadly practised among institutions, is described as 'unsustainable fantasy' (Pells 2020).

Halterbeck et al (2020) also see financial fallout from the pandemic leading to around 30,000 job losses in the sector. This is echoed by the Institute for Fiscal Studies (IFS) report (Drayton and Waltman 2020) which warns of up to 13 UK universities becoming insolvent and in need of government bailout or debt restructuring. Fazackerley (2020) describes the UK Treasury as refusing an appeal from Universities UK for a multibillion-pound bailout. O'Hara (2020) paints the extreme scenario of UK universities 'unravelling' under countervailing pressures of marketisation and central government control, leading to the sector sliding into mediocrity. With a wider lens, Marginson (2020) argues for a change of values in UK higher education to reinstate the principles of the common good above other considerations.

The impact of the UK's departure from the EU has continued to play out during the pandemic, adding a further layer of complexity to UK university decision-making. What Grey (2021) refers to as 'micro-damages' of Brexit in various sectors of the UK has impacted higher education considerably. The UK's decision to leave the Erasmus+ scheme from 2021 and to initiate its own Turing scheme is described by Jones (2021) an 'avoidable mistake'. He identifies the mutual recognition of study and the two-way nature of staff and student flows as key features of Erasmus+ that supported Internationalisation at Home (IaH), as a basis of genuine openness to intercultural exchange. Horton and Fras (2021) argue for the inclusion benefits of the EU scheme, as well as the multilateral nature of co-operation based on equality and mutuality which previously enhanced the country's soft power.

The term 'Global Britain' has been used by the UK Government (2021a) as a rationale for and an opportunity derived from Brexit in many sectors of the economy, however Horton and Fras (2021) express concern that within higher education the Turing scheme will not be inclusive or open to working across the globe. The soft power benefits of international partnerships are recognised by the UK Government (2021b) which places a central role in this for the Turing scheme.

b) Opportunities

Newman, J. (2020) notes that the key to resolving the COVID-19 crisis lies in research through global partnerships and sees an opportunity to reimagine the nature of partnerships to build equitable collaborations based on the 17 UN SDGs. She argues for using the SDG framework not only to measure impact, such as through the THE Impact Rankings (THE 2021), but also to motivate communities, citing the Partnership for Enhanced and Blended Learning (Association of Commonwealth Universities 2020).

UCL (2020) identifies COVID-19 as an SDG crisis and sees the benefits of SDGs in greater innovation and the inter-connectedness of their systems thinking approach (Reynolds et al. 2018). They recommend not only that SDGs be integrated into the curriculum but also built into partnerships with local communities.

These themes are reinforced by the SDG Bergen 21 (2021) online conference, which emphasises moving away from colonialist views of knowledge sharing towards mutual co-production and more equitable partnerships that allow networking between countries of the Global South, such as through the African Research Universities Alliance (ARUA 2021). Ogden et al (2020) similarly argue that the pandemic may accelerate changes that have already been in motion, such as utilising different virtual modalities of partnerships and greater use of

multi-lateral networks and consortia. In the same vein, Hudzik (2020a) argues for positive disruption in changes detectable before the arrival of COVID-19 that are now magnified by its impact, proposing virtual internships and more sustainable modes of engagement that do not rely on air travel, to build in Internationalisation of the Curriculum (IoC) and Internationalisation at Home (IaH).

Havarky et al (2020) also emphasise the opportunity for universities to shape the post-COVID world by moving away from neoliberal, profit-driven models towards becoming civic institutions based on inclusion and sustainability. White and Lee (2020) see the opportunity from the consequences of COVID-19 of creating a post-mobility version of internationalisation in which knowledge transfer is decoupled from physical location through initiatives such as Internationalisation at Home (IaH). Similarly, Unkule (2020) supports a move beyond physical mobility towards a more proactive and egalitarian engagement with globalisation. This is echoed by Leask and Green (2020) who describe the pandemic as a watershed for internationalisation of HE where diverse intercultural experiences can be fully integrated into domestic curriculums.

Vlachopoulos (2020) observes the opportunity for online learning to be deployed on a more systematic basis, with success depending on whether universal access to the tools and applications can be provided and whether adequate professional development is made available. Helms (2020) asserts that a major solution to COVID lies in the roll-out of COIL, to facilitate students working across cultures.

Within the domestic UK context, Jones (2020) sees the COVID-19 crisis as the best chance to change universities for good, moving away from the accountability regime and competitive environment of neoliberalism to focus on collaboration to tackle current and future crises.

(iv)   Conclusion

There are clearly countervailing effects on international HE partnerships caused by the pandemic and other concurrent events, either directly on the nature of partnerships or indirectly through the impact on the sector. Stein (2017) foresees many challenges of an uncertain future that are realised in the current pandemic crisis and argues the need for higher education to be reflexive, socially accountable and critically informed in shaping alternative futures. As Lanford (2020) asserts, global partnerships in higher education do not operate in a vacuum but should be part of a university's charter with society with outreach and research missions.

Against this backdrop, this literature review will inform the study of how international partnerships are successfully enacted in the light of COVID-19. This dissertation aims to fill a research gap for a key area of HE at a time of unprecedented flux, with the intersection of COVID-19, Brexit and other political currents.

3. Research methods

This study aims to illuminate the issue from a close-to-practice (CtP) perspective for the benefit of policy decisions and institutional strategy. It is centred on a naturalist methodology where the purpose is to understand people's experiences within natural settings (Denscombe 2014). It is based on a qualitative and phenomenological methodology to understand the subjective experience of the participants (Leedy and Ormrod 2001), recognising the multiple realities held by participants (Marshall and Rossman 2016). The study aims at discovery through

'exploratory investigations' that are not based on any firm hypothesis at the beginning (Denscombe 2014).

The research methods consist of case studies of two current international partnerships with the prior intention to hold 4-6 in-depth interviews with key participants in these projects. As Denscombe 2014 notes, case studies allow a holistic and in-depth study of the natural settings and help to understand the complex relationship between factors as they operate within a particular setting. They are vivid accounts which are 'strong on reality', while not necessarily being replicable or generalisable (Wellington 2015). As Marshall and Rossman (2016) argue, the transferability of the research findings should be left to the reader and future researchers to determine rather than the original researcher. Thomas and Myers (2015) also note that case studies do not conform to positivist concepts of generalisability, rather should contribute to the understanding and phronesis, that is the practical wisdom, of the researcher. In the words of Pring (2015), cases studies can draw attention to similar possibilities in other situations and 'ring bells'.

By the classification developed by General Accounting Office (1990), the case studies in this research are 'exploratory', that is descriptive but also aimed at generating hypotheses for later investigation. Further, the case studies allow understanding of the settings both intrinsically and collectively (Stake 1995).

The case studies have been anonymised and can be described as:

A. **Collaboration Project I** is a capacity building project, consisting of 10 universities, of which five are from South Africa and five from western Europe, co-ordinated by a South African and a European institution, which was launched in November 2019 and is scheduled to run to November 2022.

B. **Collaboration Project II** was launched in late 2019 with the mission to improve the access of participating countries to quality higher education. The project is based at a Category 2 UNESCO centre in collaboration with an insititute in southern China. Initially a network of 15 partner institutions in Africa and Asia-Pacific was forged, of which four were from China, seven from Africa and four from Asia-Pacific.

The selection of these two case studies was made based on several advantages: they are multilateral partnerships that provide maximum variation in their contrasting locus of activity and both cases have strategic importance (Flyvbjerg 2001). The choice of one case study that has no initial involvement from a European partner was also intentional, to de-centre the study away from a purely European perspective. In terms of instance selection outlined by General Accounting Office (1990), the cases studies selected serve the purposes identified as 'best cases' to identify the reasons for an effective project and 'representative' to elicit important variations. Crucially they are contemporary to the emergence of COVID-19 and have information published online in the public domain.

Following Denzin (1989), Yin 2009 suggests multiple sources of case study evidence are more convincing and accurate, since this allows for data triangulation and the development of converging lines of inquiry. Also, construct validity is supported as multiple sources of evidence provide multiple measures of the same construct.

Interviews within case studies, Yin 2009 argues, are one of the most important sources of case study evidence. Interviews with external individuals will facilitate a 'Peripheral Socio Cultural' lens (Hanson and Appleby 2015), which builds on Brookfield's (1995) theory of four lens for critical reflection by widening and

enriching the critical reflective process.

(i)   Positionality statement

The researcher's personal lens is humanist, liberal and internationalist, while having an interpretivist epistemology. It is recognised that the researcher is part of the research and is not objective. The focus is thus on specific, contextualised environments and acknowledge that reality and knowledge are influenced by that environment. My career in international education has influenced a strong belief in the interpersonal dimension of partnerships, based on intercultural competence.

As an independent consultant in the international HE sector, my position in conducting this study is as an outside but close-to-practice (CtP) practitioner-researcher. This provides benefits in terms of understanding internationalisation within the sector. The potential challenges of an external practitioner accessing the settings of the two case study projects did not materialise except when navigating the approval process in one institution. I encountered no situations of power imbalances and the interviews were marked by high levels of trust. This facilitated professional acceptance on the part of the participants, producing conversations that were focused on professional issues. At the same time, a certain guardedness sometimes may have prevailed in some responses regarding the case study projects, in order not to dwell on less than positive features, highlighting the way in which the research process may be influenced by the researcher-participant relationship (Savin-Baden and Major 2013).

The research follows a cultural relativist perspective, recognising behaviour and actions as being relative to the participants' culture, described by Fetterman (2008) as an emic view of reality. The intention was to achieve a balanced axiology, acknowledging that the outcome of research is value-bound and reflects

the values of researcher. Through 'bracketing', my intention was to set aside my own experiences (Moustakas 1994) and to act reflectively in cultivating curiosity (LeVasseur 2003).

(ii)   Data collection

The Six-stage process (Yin 2009) provides a widely accepted approach to case studies (Baškarada 2014), involving stages for planning, designing, preparing, collecting, analysing and sharing.

The sampling strategy for the study was purposive, by identifying potential interview subjects from the respective websites for the two case study projects who were selected because of their contribution to one of the projects, because they have some unique insight or because of the position they hold (Denscombe 2014). Purposive sampling also allows a broad range of perspectives and it was thus intended to interview subjects of different nationalities and backgrounds and on different continents.

The assertion of Walsham (2006) that gaining access to suitable case study organisations is perhaps the most challenging step in the process was evidenced in this research study. Access request correspondence, which included a Participant Information Sheet outlining the Research Proposal, and a Consent Form, was sent to the key stakeholders at the same time, with largely immediate responses but in one institution it marked the beginning of a five-month process, most of which involved navigating the institution's approval process.

In most institutions decision-making for such requests was devolved to individuals, but in one case decision-making remained a bureaucratic process. This mirrors a comment made in an interview that internationalisation projects in the same country may reflect similar patterns of ownership, in that decision-

making for projects does not sit within faculties, rather in the institution's administration.

The study was desk-based and online, to mitigate the health risks posed by COVID-19. In conducting the study, I endeavoured to remain open, ensuring that details of the research process were made transparent. To recognise the subjective nature of research, I introduced myself to each participant in terms of values, ideological biases and closeness to research topic. Emphasis was placed on establishing rapport with participants to capture the nuances of meaning (Denzin and Lincoln 1998) and, although the four research questions remained constant, other questions evolved according to initial responses of participants (Mertens 2009).

The switch to videoconferencing platforms brought about by the COVID-19 pandemic meant that all participants were familiar with the tools and were happy to interact online with a research interviewer they had not previously met. This was equally true for interviews with participants in South and South-East Asia as it was for interviews with nearby participants that under normal circumstances would have been conducted in-person. The time zone differences with Pakistan (5 hours) and China (8 hours) were managed by arranging interviews in the early morning UK time that were still within working hours in the participant's country.

The interviews were semi-structured (Fontana and Frey 1994) with a 'Grand Tour' question followed by sub-questions (Spradley 1979). Both closed and open-ended, non-directional questions were used for greater flexibility and to generate rich data (Creswell 2003). Interviews were based around the four research questions, allowing also for follow-up, probing questions.

The interviews were designed to last a notional 45-60 minutes, which in practice lasted between 60 and 75 minutes. The interview process followed the sequence

of orientation, information gathering and closing. In one case the interview was interrupted by a fault in the participant's university network, which was resolved by the participant reconnecting on their personal mobile phone. This unreliability in internet provision was referred to by some participants, as an obstacle to effective online communication with certain countries in collaborative projects and online learning in general.

I worked with my supervisor throughout the research study to assist with reliability and ethics. The study is based on limited primary research, which aims to add to professional academic discourse. As it is not a definitive study, I recognise it may not fully answer the research questions. In the conclusion recommendations will be made for further research and future practice.

(iii)   Case studies

Collaboration Project I

Project I is a capacity building project, co-ordinated by a South African and a European institution, which is scheduled to run from November 2019 to November 2022. The consortium is EU-funded and has been awarded nearly 1 million euros in funding from the Erasmus+ programme.

The project is designed to adopt a contextualised South African concept of Internationalisation of the Curriculum (IoC), which integrates Collaborative Online International Learning (COIL), sometimes referred to as virtual exchanges.

The aim is for South African partner universities to become leading institutions in IoC, curriculum transformation, and COIL virtual exchanges, in which decolonisation of the curriculum and the integration of African indigenous knowledge are central aspects. It is intended that COIL virtual exchanges provide an alternative to physical mobility, the opportunities for which are seen to be restricted by socioeconomic conditions within South Africa.

The intended outputs include publications, resources and a conference, aiming to have an impact on national higher education policy. The aim at the beginning of the project is to engage 5250 students in virtual exchanges, equally split between Europe and South Africa, 55 sustained COIL exchanges and the training of 55 academic teaching staff. It is also intended to publish an online toolkit for COIL exchanges in South Africa. A significant element of the project in 2020 was intended to involve site visits and face-to-face training, which were transferred to the online environment due to COVID-19.

The consortium consists of 10 universities, of which five are from South Africa and five from western Europe, including one from UK. The two lead institutions have a history of partnership, previously working together in a previous mobility consortium.

The implementation of the project has therefore been adapted to a purely online medium, beginning with the first training workshop in March-April 2020. Due to varying levels of experience of operating in the online environment, an open dialogue has been maintained to share the realities of the current situation, and how the training can be suitably tailored.

Collaboration Project II

Project II was launched in early 2020 with the mission to improve the access of participating countries to quality higher education. It is aligned with the Chinese government Belt and Road Initiative (BRI), formerly known as the One Belt One Road (OBOR) policy (OECD 2018).

Project II is a Category 2 UNESCO centre in collaboration with an institute in southern China. In the three years before the launch of the project, a network of twelve partner institutions in Africa and Asia-Pacific was forged, with activities including professional development and the creation of smart classrooms. The initiative is designed specifically to develop online programmes with an ICT-related content that will meet the changing demands of industry sectors in each

economy. It is also overtly aligned with SDG4, which focuses on inclusive, equitable and lifelong education and with gender equality in the participation of teaching and learning.

Of the 15 founding partner HEIs, four were from China, seven from Africa and four from Asia-Pacific. The collaboration was joined by eight high-tech enterprises in China, receiving funding of 10 million RMB (approximately £1.1million) from a commercial technology corporation.

The project provides an open online learning platform for higher education courses with an ICT focus and learning tools for teachers' professional development. Initial content is intended to be provided by institutions and enterprises in China, with other partners creating content in subsequent years. It is intended that the project will expand within the next five years to involve more institutions in different countries.

While the initiative was planned before the advent of the pandemic, its use of the online medium has coincided with a global need for all higher education to migrate online, and it has progressed successfully with webinars and case sharing during 2020-21.

4. Data analysis

The analysis of data aims to be holistic, exploring rival explanations after Yin 2009, through grounded theory and an inductive approach moving from data to explanation to theory (Corbin and Strauss 2008). Examining two case studies allows both 'within' and 'cross-case' analysis in developing theory (Barratt et al 2011). The constant comparative method (CCM) is used to discover latent patterns in participants' words (Glaser 2002) and arrive at theories that are grounded in the data (Glaser and Strauss 1967).

There were eight participants (labelled A-H), predominantly Professors and Doctors, in seven interviews, who are all key stakeholders in one of the two case study collaborations:

Interview	Participant	Title/role	Specialism	Institution/Location	Collaboration Project
1	A.	Professor	Global Learning	Partner university - UK	I
	B.	Doctor	Global Learning	Partner university - UK	I
2	C.	Doctor	Quality and mobility in Higher Education	United Nations agency - France	II
3	D.	Senior academic	Internationalisation and COIL	Partner university - Netherlands	I
4	E.	Doctor	Project Co-director	Project office - China	II
5	F.	Professor	Engineering and Technology	Partner university - Pakistan	II
6	G.	Doctor	Office for International Affairs	Partner university - South Africa	I
7	H.	Professor	Education research and policy studies	Partner university - South Africa	I

Table 1.1   Profiles of participants interviewed

The data from the interviews was analysed under the headings of the research questions, below.

<u>Short-to-medium term</u>

Despite what participant D described as a 'horrible situation' caused by the pandemic, **positive** impacts were seen by participants in both collaboration projects, not least in the interpersonal domain. According to participant B, 'everyone has come together and thrived' and 'I've made some very strong connections with people I've never met'. There was a particular focus on the 'Friday cuppa', an informal engagement which partners can join every week on a purely voluntary basis – its voluntary nature is important in distinguishing it from formal partnership meetings. Conversations vary from purely personal matters to project-related issues but has no pre-determined agenda.

As participant H said, 'In that space, sometimes we talk nonsense, often we just brainstorm or follow up on ideas. We get to know each other, we talk about the kids, we come up with an idea for a research project.' Participant G elaborated the rationale for arranging the online 'cuppa' as aiming to sustain and grow the 'trust capital' in the collaboration, relating to the accumulated goodwill and sense of shared values. This demonstrates that this is a purposeful intervention and is identified by the same participant as the key factor in the success of the project.

In contrast, participants involved in Collaboration Project II emphasised the technical impact of an accelerated move to the online environment. Participant F credited the project in doing 'a marvellous job' in moving activities entirely online while participant E spoke of the agility and responsiveness in successfully making 200 online courses available and running 10 online training sessions in the first four months of 2020. This reveals a focus as much on the interpersonal process

as on the project content in the case of Collaboration Project I, while in the other case study the emphasis lay in the technical content and project outcomes.

The **negative** impacts of the pandemic on partnerships in the short-to-medium term were recognised by all participants, as participant H remarked 'humanity has been hit very hard'. Participant A described how the pandemic had 'killed projects dead' and had caused 'immense disruption', since most projects relied on physical mobility, which participant G described as a move into 'an emergency virtual mode'. A strong negative effect was detected on a personal level - 'the pandemic has taken a huge toll on all university staff members, particularly academics'. At a time of enormous adaptation to the effects of the pandemic, additional international initiatives were described by the same participant as 'simply too much for academics to apply their mind to' and an observation of 'virtual fatigue' gradually creeping in. This is summarised as 'a gradual adverse impact' in the university partnership space, in contrast to the specific success of Collaboration Project I where trust capital had been prioritised.

Long-term

The **positive** impact of the pandemic on **interpersonal** engagement in partnerships was seen by participants in Collaboration Project I not just in the short-medium term but as long-term changes.

Participant A noted a greater readiness to interact once it had become the norm, saying 'there's nothing holding anyone back from engaging'. It was now realised that 'it's possible just to be in touch' whereas previously 'you often waited for the big partner meetings to really get back into discussion – I think it's 24/7 now.' This was echoed by participant B who saw virtual partnerships being the long-term 'ideal' and becoming more likely because of the newly adapted, 'collegial ways of working online'.

Participant D observed that the pandemic had helped to bring about a realisation of the **alternatives to physical mobility**, notably COIL projects. Building partnerships with new and unexpected partners were observed, which would not have been considered with physical mobility with its emphasis on rankings. Virtual exchange projects were seen to have intercultural benefits and being 'tied to learning outcomes' and 'embedded in learning'. This contrasted with physical mobility, which is rarely part of the curriculum and limited to the elite – as participant D described, 'great for the 10% but what about the 90%'.

As a practitioner of **COIL**, participant D expanded on the wider benefits that COIL brings in terms of inclusion – 'internationalisation for all students' – and in the potential for interdisciplinary projects – 'not just cultural diversity and geographical diversity but also disciplinary diversity'. Further benefits of COIL were highlighted by the same participant in the ownership for projects sitting with the faculty rather than the institution's International Office, which opens further opportunities for collaboration. In addition, the benefits of COIL for developing digital competences and critical thinking were put forward. The same participant concluded 'it's such a game changer for people in my field'.

Participant G, working within the same partnership, put forward moving to a **blended** partnership mode 'which retain[s] the essential aspects of in-person engagement but which also integrate[s] the opportunities of virtual spaces'. The ultimate benefit of this was seen as having 'more tools at hand to create the desired equal and equitable partnerships'. Participant C spoke of a similar realisation that will lead to greater use of a blended approach, even once the pandemic is resolved – 'COVID has proven the value of online education'. The benefits of widening access and enabling partnerships with industry were also cited, but with the reservation that changes in education can take 'a long, long time', often ten years or more.

In Collaborative Project II, Participant E observed how COVID-19 had facilitated a digital transformation, 'wittingly or unwittingly'. Participant F similarly focused on this transformation in the HE sector, saying that the enforced nature of change was an advantage since if there had been a choice, 'less than 5% [of faculty] would have taken this as an option'. The move online over two semesters had given the university confidence in the online mode so that it would 'remain a very important factor for us, whether or not COVID really goes away'.

The long-term **limitations** of online partnership projects seen by several participants are closely related to the short-term impacts. Participant E observed that certain partnership activities were difficult to manage, citing the example of a 5-hour meeting with 35 partners as an example – 'we really missed the face-to-face interaction' and 'you don't really feel the juicy stuff'. Participant C also underlined the shortcomings of the online environment, saying that you can't get that cultural intelligence online' – a sentiment that would possibly not be shared by proponents of COIL, who see intercultural competence as a key feature of the approach. The same participant also observed a barrier in the lack of acceptance of online modes of education by employers and parents. Similarly, participant B noted the reluctance of national governments, such as that of Jordan, that places strict limits on the proportion of HE that can be delivered online, and the popular view of online learning as 'lesser than face-to-face learning'.

Other negative impacts were acting indirectly in the context of COVID-19 in the **financial** domain. Despite the impact of the pandemic on travel, participant A noted 'funders still assume physical mobility' and at the same time this form of mobility is 'often too expensive', requiring a change in funding to 'shift budget into staff costs'. In a related point, strong financial imperatives within universities were seen by participant B as a further barrier to long-term success in partnerships – '[my] university needs to be generating a certain amount of income but in the current situation that's very difficult'. This was echoed by participant D who

foresaw that 'universities focusing on commercialising internationalisation will quickly go back to international student marketing', thus prioritising financial objectives and passing up the opportunity to embrace the benefits of virtual exchange.

A further financial limitation was observed by participant F, who noted that the long-term financial sustainability of Collaboration Project II relied on the continued funding by the organising partner, such that 'if we were asked to pay for the membership, we would probably not be able to pay'. Funding is clearly a key element in all partnerships and is linked to themes of equity and equality.

Participant B highlighted the impact of the digital divide on virtual partnerships, in that 'data is prohibitively expensive' for students in countries such as South Africa, a factor which is not often considered by faculties in the UK when choosing to develop activities in the online space.

(ii)   How do the effects of COVID-19 interact with other social, political and education forces?

For the UK participants across both case studies, the impact of the UK's departure from the European Union ('**Brexit**') was a key issue. On one hand, participant A spoke of a wariness on the part of non-UK institutions of having UK partners following Brexit, noting that in joining Collaboration Project I the UK institution 'had to bring together evidence to allay the fears of partners'. The same participant added that 'the landscape is shifting and changing, it's quite a nervous time', concluding that 'the UK needs to maybe rethink how it's going across its business with more acknowledgement, understanding, more equity among partners'.

Participant B described the negative impact of Brexit as 'undesirable', with uncertainty at the time of the interview surrounding the impact on Erasmus+

funding and its successor in the UK, the Turing scheme. The same participant observed that there had been 'a little bit of a downturn with universities not wanting to work with us until things are clearer'. This was not necessarily a definitive halt to collaboration – 'I don't think anyone has said to us, we're not working with you because you're UK' - rather 'it is […] navigating uncertainty'. Participant B also noted that 'for UK universities it's going to be an interesting next period', where 'interesting' would appear denote highly uncertain.

Participant D provided a non-UK, European perspective, which recognises the negative effect of Brexit for the UK – 'it sort of strengthens the rest of Europe' and 'there's a lot of interest for Ireland right now', referring to Ireland taking a greater role in the EU as an anglophone country. This positive effect for other countries was reiterated – 'it actually gave an impulse to internationalisation within Europe' and 'it has almost given a positive boost to the Erasmus initiative', while recognising that UK universities had not supported Brexit – 'it's so sad for all those British academics that do not want it, never wanted it'.

On the other hand, participant C considered Brexit to be 'a red herring' – 'I don't think it will have any effect on internationalisation' and 'I don't see Brexit as an indicator that UK is now not interested in international co-operation'. The same participant described how Erasmus+ was 'a funding tool, but it was very insular to Europe', while Horizon 2020 funding remained in place.

In the broader context of increasing **nationalism**, participant G observed that this trend had 'had a massive adverse impact in certain spaces' since its focus was 'on self-interest not on mutuality', while recognising that 'not every country has nationalistic tendencies as the US and UK'. The same participant acknowledged that institutional autonomy still prevailed but there was an expectation that universities would not act contrary to the priorities of government.

As a contrast to nationalism, participant H emphasised the importance of the philosophy of Ubuntu in African partnerships, with its strong focus on **collectivism** which is 'not a Eurocentric, individualistic way of doing'. Referring to Collaboration Project I, the same participant described how 'it's as if there's a collective understanding that we are a partnership that invest in each other', something that 'all the European partners have fallen for'. This led to the conclusion that 'what makes a partnership work is the collectivism in spite of the geopolitics, and not as a result of it', suggesting that the underlying culture of a project can override the effects of global trends.

The increasing agency of **China** in international partnerships was observed by participant F – 'the Chinese government is pushing hard in bringing these institutes up' and referred to their 'unique contribution', contrasting with the relative inaction of European governments in building collaborations with Africa and Asia-Pacific. Participant C also acknowledged the growing importance of China as a partner in partnerships with these regions but noted an inherent risk if China's geopolitical focus were to shift – 'beneficiary countries may no longer be included [in the project]'. At project level participant F noted that 'there's a lot of input coming from China' and that the balance of contributions was 'quite one way' although some partners in the collaboration were equipped to make contributions.

    (iii)   To what extent do the selected case studies provide a model of international collaboration that will meet UN SDGs, set out in '2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development'?

This question asked the participants to evaluate their collaboration project as a model of partnerships with reference to concepts of sustainability. The confidence of participants in their respective collaboration project was understandably high.

In Collaboration Project I the theme of **equity**, as a key feature of SDGs, was highlighted as a strong underlying characteristic of the project. Participant A pointed out that although funding came from the EU, the lead project partner was South African – 'in itself pioneering to have a partner lead from the Global South'. The same participant suggested that UK institutions may need to rethink their approach to partnerships and show 'more acknowledgement and understanding of […] issues of equity among partners'. Participant G stressed this theme as key in a successful partnership, saying 'I'm very happy we work together as equals' and 'we live equality' in developing a more equal consortium. The same participant argued that to achieve equality 'there needs to be a sense of agency', adding that it may not always be the fault of the dominant partner that there is imbalance in power dynamics. The example was cited of a university in the Global South that entered a partnership with 'the prophecy of disempowerment', pointing to the need for a change of attitude to create greater agency, 'empowering [Global South universities] to go self-assured into partnerships'.

Equity in international partnerships is thus closely linked with **power dynamics** and relations between Global North and Global South. Participant B noted the unique situation of a non-European university leading a European-funded collaboration. This moves away from 'Anglo-centric internationalisation' and could act as a template for further partnerships. Similarly, participant A argued for **decolonisation**, the removal of negative colonial relationships, in partnerships as 'respect for plural ways of knowing', noting that mindsets on this matter were shifting.

Participant C, from the perspective of a UN agency, specified SDG 4.3 – quality, inclusion and equity of access – as the key focus for the collaboration project, arguing that quality of provision requires good practice partnerships. The same participant emphasised that 'equity and inclusion start at policy level' and, in the context of sensitivities of recolonisation of Africa, advocated South-South co-

operation as a means of achieving best fit in partnerships. The issue of decolonisation and language arose with participant E describing how the project involved the commonly used descriptions of servers as 'master' and 'slave'. These descriptors had been removed from the project so as not to cause offence for partners in former colonised countries.

In terms of power dynamics, it was notable that Collaboration Project II was arranged by invitation by the main partner in China. This was mentioned also by participant F who spoke about the application and selection process. The relationship between main partner and invited institutions appears therefore to reflect a donor-recipient model, common in the early period of international development. Participant F echoed this idea, saying 'so far we're on the receiving end' by being in receipt of hardware, smart classrooms, and training. The same participant described the wider benefit of the project in the networking of Global South partners and the potential for additional co-operation with these institutions that would have strong strategic objectives for solving regional problems.

At institutional level participant B noted that the project aimed to enshrine the SDGs and the university was encouraging its faculty to embrace their principles in solving global challenges. Participant C observed that interest in SDGs at institutional level across the globe had been 'phenomenal' and was a key part of the critical thinking agenda, helping to produce people who can solve problems.

Participant D proposed COIL as a model approach to international co-operation on several levels, connecting strongly with diversity and inclusion, and meeting budgetary needs of the Global South. The same participant argued the challenge was to remove the Global North dominance in projects, and to 'create very equitable, inclusive partnerships, often through the use of duos' in the collaboration, partnering an institution from the Global South with one from the Global North within the overall structure of the project.

Also at the institutional level, the issue of **ownership** was highlighted by participant D as a key factor in the success of partnerships, specifically in the hierarchical relationship between academics and university management. By this reasoning, partnerships become easier to sustain where that relationship is more equitable, as is the case often in the Global North, whereas a greater vertical hierarchy where decision-making lies with university management leads to academics unable to take responsibility for collaboration, which participant D described as 'super-challenging'. This led the same participant to conclude that institutionalising faculty-led COIL was problematic.

(iv)   What principles, approaches and strategies will enable SDG-compliant international partnerships to thrive and be resilient long-term post-COVID?

Responses from participants to this question were often closely related to responses to the first and third research questions, and involved participants recapping and crystallising their previous responses.

Equity and inclusion were advocated as global policy goals by participant C, from a UN agency perspective, implying more equitable power dynamics in the relationships in a partnership. The same theme was echoed by participants at the institutional and project level, such as participant B – 'we focus a lot on equality and decolonisation' adding 'I think that is appealing to partners'. Participant D saw the problem in partnerships being the dominance of Global North universities and the challenge therefore to create equitable and inclusive partnerships. Participant A cited a caveat – 'whilst we want relationships to be equitable, I think we can't just assume that partners want the same things that we want', pointing to the perception in some countries of the Global South that Western education maintains a primacy in the global context.

Concepts of equity connect closely with power dynamics and agency, and at institutional level, participant G suggested that partners from the Global South should develop their own sense of agency. The principle of **equity** extends to faculty level, with participant B observing the benefits of hierarchies from becoming flatter as a result of the use of video conferencing during the pandemic – 'everyone talking equally' and 'empowering to have just normal conversations'.

The related issues of **diversity and decolonisation** were advocated as benefits of COIL by participant D, also supported by participants A and B as respecting plurality. The same participant pointed to the additional advantages for **inclusion** from a COIL approach, arguing that it represents 'internationalisation for all'. These principles can be built into partnerships by the overt configuring of UN **SDGs**.

Participant F emphasised the value of having a **consortium** of partners over simple bi-lateral co-operation – 'if the contribution is coming from so many directions, [the partnership] becomes sustainable'. In addition, participant C valued HE partnerships with **industry** as a means of developing workplace skills in graduates. In a similar vein, participants E and F argued for attracting industry to be technology partners, for example as providers of smart classrooms.

Support for the approach of **COIL** and virtual exchange was notable from participant D and all other participants of Collaboration Project I. COIL makes an important contribution to Internationalisation of the Curriculum (IoC), producing interdisciplinary and intercultural benefits when embedded into the curriculum.

Participant E advocated that the substance of a partnership in the form of good **design** and relevant **content** was key to a successful partnership, based also on a sound understanding of partners and their local conditions. The same participant argued for the focus of a partnership to be to solve a real-life problem,

an opinion that was echoed by participant F who argued 'partnerships are more naturally built on research problems of common interest', building from a strategic perspective. Participant A also argued for partnerships that aim to solve global challenges.

Participants G and H were the strongest proponents of **trust capital** as a key ingredient of successful partnerships, with participant G describing it as 'the glue which holds our collaboration together'. This was described as purposely working through social activities held in the informal environment whereby interpersonal relationships are forged and maintained. This was emphasised by participant H who described the close connections made with European partners as stronger than previously in the physical space. This sentiment was summarised concisely by participant A as a highly beneficial 'focus on our humanness'.

5. Findings and discussion

The responses received in research interviews are summarised and mapped to the four research questions, below.

(i) Research Question 1: What is the impact of COVID-19 on the development of international higher education partnerships in the short-to-medium term and the long term?

Among all participants, there was a clear recognition of the damaging effects of the pandemic and that humanity had been 'hit hard'. In terms of international partnerships, the **negative short-to-medium** term effects of the pandemic, typified by projects 'killed dead' and 'immense disruption' leading to a 'move into an emergency virtual mode', reflected the observations of Marinoni et al (2020) with mobility curtailed and partnerships weakened. Not so emphasised in the

literature was the acknowledgement of the 'huge toll' on university staff and the 'virtual fatigue' impacting academics from the additional workload.

Despite the evident crisis brought about by the pandemic, participants were keen to highlight the **positive** impacts in both collaboration projects. In the case of Collaboration Project I, these positive outcomes were above all from an intentional investment in the interpersonal domain, exemplified by the 'Friday cuppa' event. This aimed to build the 'trust capital' between partners through voluntary, informal online gatherings. This emphasis on the *process* of the project contrasted with the focus among Collaboration Project II participants on the *outcomes* of the project, suggesting as much value is placed on the interpersonal relationships as on the tangible benefits. By contrast, participants in Collaboration Project II placed emphasis generally on the technical outcomes, such as the number of online courses and training sessions delivered. This suggests a difference of emphasis between a relationship-based approach on one hand and a technical, content-based approach on the other. Undoubtedly, there needs to be both content and relationships in a successful partnership, so they are not mutually exclusive, but it is noteworthy that the emphasis between the two projects is quite marked.

When speaking of **longer-term impacts**, participants referred to limitations observed under the circumstances of COVID that would constrain the success of international partnerships, either directly or indirectly. These **limitations** were closely related to short-term impacts. The shortcomings of the online environment were cited by participants of Collaboration Project II, particularly the absence of face-to-face meetings, referred to as the 'juicy stuff', and the difficulty in managing large and lengthy partner meetings on online platforms. In addition, a participant from the same project spoke of the drawback of not being able to develop 'cultural intelligence' online. However, it is notable that participants of Collaboration Project I placed greater emphasis on the positive outcomes of

mitigating the disruption to in-person communication. Furthermore, the development of intercultural competence through COIL was advocated by participants of Collaboration Project I, suggesting the online environment can support the development of working relationships and of 'cultural intelligence'.

It was also notable that the current **funding structures** were cited by participants of Collaboration Project II as limitations on partnerships under COVID. This points to an inflexibility in funding at policy level that still assumes physical mobility without recognising the opportunities of virtual mobility. Currently funding is geared largely to promoting student and staff travel, whereas in the case of virtual collaboration the need is for professional development. By comparison, funding for physical mobility is seen as more expensive than for virtual mobility. At a time of financial threat for UK universities, highlighted by Adams and Hall (2020) and O'Hara (2020), funding for virtual mobility would fit with prevailing economic circumstances but would require a shift of mindset to value the benefits of virtual collaborations.

Further in the financial sphere, the strong commercial needs of universities within the neoliberal context identified by Bamberger (2019) were borne out by participants of Collaboration Project I, observing that income generation was an expectation on academics in partnership-building. It was also foreseen that universities who had a focus on 'commercialising internationalisation' would revert to maximising revenue from international activities, such as student recruitment, once travel restrictions were eased. This suggests the financial imperatives of the market model have a strong hold on institutions, who having switched to an online mode at the start of the pandemic are reluctant to embrace the benefits of COIL and Internationalisation at Home (IaH). At policy level, Marginson (2020) sees the opportunity with COVID for a change in values in UK higher education to move away from commercialisation to reinstate principles of

public good within the sector, but the evidence of this research suggests that the UK model remains unchanged and precarious.

Despite being anathema to prevailing UK government ideology and politically unlikely in the current climate, a policy shift away from marketisation towards social good could be justified on the basis of greater sustainability and stability, since there is a growing sense of crisis in the UK sector with the UK Treasury refusing the appeal from Universities UK for a bail-out. The opportunity to move from profit-driven models was described by [Havarky et al (2020)](#) with universities becoming civic institutions based on inclusion and sustainability. The removal of the compelling need for commercialisation would lift the need for an institution's internationalisation activities to meet commercial objectives to and allow collaboration to focus entirely on meeting teaching and research needs.

In the context of funding within collaboration projects, it was remarked that a single source of funding from the lead partner held certain risk in terms of long-term sustainability, given the possibility that other partners may not be able to pay if asked to contribute and the potential for strategic priorities to change in the lead partner.

Another long-term limitation for developing partnerships in the time of COVID is data that is prohibitively expensive in many countries of the Global South. This was acknowledged by the lead partner of Collaboration Project II who also observed in these countries not only a shortage of equipment such as smart classrooms and computers with up-to-date processors, but also an unreliable electricity supply. By way of example, my interview with participant F was interrupted by an outage in the internet connection in that institution.

The short-medium term positive impact seen by participants of Collaboration Project I on **interpersonal engagement** also extended to the longer-term,

exemplified by participant A suggesting that communication with partners was '24/7 now' and participant B referring to 'collegial ways of working online'. This was mirrored by participants D, G and H who spoke of the close relationships developed during the collaboration. It is important to note that this was a purposeful investment in the interpersonal domain in order to build what participants referred to as '**trust capital**'. This focus on the value of the interpersonal reflects Ma and Montgomery (2021) who argue that it is individuals and their relationships that make partnerships sustainable and Brandenburg (2016) who recognised the importance of human dimensions to collaboration. It is also consistent with Hoellerman et al (2009) who identified trust and the personal connections of both academic and administrative staff as key to sustainable partnerships.

At institutional level, the interviews suggested that the **alternatives to physical mobility** have received an added impetus in some institutions where the benefits of COIL have been more fully recognised. As Ogden et al (2020) argue, these changes may have already been in motion, such as virtual exchanges and greater use of multi-lateral networks and consortia. Similarly, Hudzik (2020b) and White and Lee (2020) see the opportunity for greater use of virtual internships and other sustainable modes of engagement that do not rely on air travel, building Internationalisation of the Curriculum (IoC) and Internationalisation at Home (IaH). Helms (2020) too asserts that the roll-out of COIL will facilitate working across cultures. The realisation of COIL's benefits as 'such a game changer' is therefore borne out by the literature. Vlachopoulos (2020) identifies the opportunities for online modes to be used more systematically which was reflected by participants from both projects seeing the benefits of having 'more tools at hand', observing that 'COVID has proven the value of online education' and that COVID had facilitated a digital transformation 'wittingly or unwittingly'.

Some participants of Collaboration Project I observed the benefits from COIL in terms of intercultural competence, equity and diversity, echoing Unkule (2020) and Leask and Green (2020). Thus, it can be argued that the pandemic is a potential watershed for internationalisation of HE where alternatives to physical mobility can be further developed.

(ii)   Research Question 2: How do the effects of COVID-19 interact with other social, political and education forces?

This question prompted responses citing issues ranging from Brexit, nationalism, collectivism, and the role of China. The interaction of **Brexit** on partnerships during the pandemic was understandably an issue for European and UK participants, although there was an acknowledgment of its impact from some non-European participants too. Participant C was in a minority in expressing the opinion that Brexit was having no effect on internationalisation, while other participants saw considerable downsides of Brexit for the UK and even a benefit for former EU partners. These downsides included anxiety on the part of European partners about joining collaborations with the UK and a reduction in universities wishing to partner with the UK, at least in the short run. While it was noted that the disruption did not necessarily mean a definitive halt to collaboration, the level of concern among UK-based participants was genuine, even if couched in terms that were consciously understated. There were references to the continuation of Horizon 2020 funding in the short run as a mitigating factor but the loss of Erasmus+ funding was clearly a source of concern.

The non-UK, European participant, on the other hand, expressed personal support for UK colleagues facing the effects of Brexit, while adding with a degree of regret that the EU had received renewed momentum from the UK's departure and pointing out that Ireland had benefitted specifically, which was understood

from being the remaining anglophone country in the union. This sentiment had not been noted in the literature but perhaps reflects the desire among EU partners not to speak negatively about their former partner to maintain the best relations possible in the long term.

Despite the benefits of Global Britain forecast in UK Government (2021a) none of the participants pointed to specific upsides to the UK's departure. The desire of UK institutions to engage in international co-operation was universally underlined but there was an overriding sense that Brexit places barriers to collaboration for UK institutions, which went beyond the 'uncertainty' that the UK media have commonly referred to. This applied at a practical level with the view that the new Turing scheme introduced by the UK government was inferior to the Erasmus+ funding that it was designed to replace and improve on, as Jones (2021) observes the new scheme does not include mutual recognition and only covers outward mobility. At a wider level, another UK-based participant expressed the idea that the global landscape was shifting, and a more fundamental rethink was needed of how UK institutions approached their internationalisation efforts, with greater reflexivity and sense of equity. This echoes the Forum for the Future (2019) which argues that Brexit endangered a globalist approach to internationalisation, and supports the evidence of the Royal Society 2018 and Mitchell 2020, who point to the detrimental impacts of Brexit.

Nationalism, which had been identified among the drivers of Brexit, was described by a participant in South Africa as having a 'massive adverse impact' and 'very detrimental' with its dominant focus on self-interest, as noted by Worthington (2018). This was also reflected by Altbach and de Wit (2017) who describe how nationalism limits international education and by Forum for the Future (2019) which observed how nationalism causes intentional divisiveness and discourages collective action.

It was notable that one of the participants in South Africa highlighted the importance of **collectivism** in partnerships, specifically through the African philosophy of Ubuntu. This supports Oviawe 2016 who identified Ubuntu as less positivistic, Eurocentric and individualistic than the norm in the Global North. The participant described the partnership as investing in each other and that the European partners had 'fallen for' the benefits of Ubuntu through the experience, adding that collectivism in a project can override the negative impact of geopolitics.

The increasing agency of **China** in international collaboration was noted by some participants, one observing that this was a result of government policy to help institutions in the Global South to develop. This reflects the view of Lo and Pan (2020) who observe the aim of internationalisation of higher education in China as the gaining of soft power on the global stage. The growing importance of China can also be seen through the development of the 2013 Belt and Road Initiative (BRI), which Peters (2020) observes connects the development of higher education with the development of the digital infrastructure with large parts of Central and South Asia and Africa. Collaboration Project II, with institutions in China leading collaboration with counterparts in those regions, would seem to provide a clear example of how the BRI is implemented in the HE space, and evidence of raising quality in higher education, which Cai (2011) identifies. One participant, while recognising the growing importance of China in international partnerships, pointed to a degree of risk in collaboration, if there were to be a shift of geopolitical focus in government policy.

In 2020 China was the largest source of applications for international patents in the world for the second consecutive year (Farge 2021) and has become a leading global actor in science and technology, especially in robotics and Artificial Intelligence (AI). Debates persist about Intellectual Property Rights (IPR) with concerns in Western countries about securing confidentiality especially in science

and technology projects. Although Huang and Smith (2019) point to some improvement in the situation, the issue may require a strengthening of enforceable international protocols. These issues, if unresolved, against a backdrop of adverse geopolitics and global trade, could lead to a major fracture in internationalisation of higher education.

(iii)   Research Question 3: To what extent do the selected case studies provide a model of international collaboration that will meet UN SDGs, set out in '2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development'?

This question prompted responses from participants that understandably showed a high level of confidence in their respective projects, justified around themes of equity, diversity and inclusion, power dynamics, and ownership. In answering this question, only one participant, in a role with a UN agency, referred to a specific SDG aim, 4.3 focusing on quality, inclusion and equity of access, while other participants gave responses that referred only generally to some of the principles on which the SDGs are built. This suggests that SDGs are not necessarily the primary driver of policy and practice for HE institutions but represent one of several motives for international activities. As Wulff (2020) observes, there is a divergence of viewpoints within the education sector about how SDGs translate into policies, and participants' responses similarly reflected different priorities.

There were several references by participants to themes of equity and the related subject of power dynamics between the Global North and Global South as a model of international collaboration. The observation by Brinkerhoff (2002) that equality in decision-making and mutual benefit are key to partnerships was borne out by several responses. Collins (2012) questions the feasibility of Global North and Global South being able to enter into an equitable collaboration but the careful attention to power dynamics shown by European respondents and the positive outcomes described by all in Collaborative Project I appear to demonstrate that this type of partnership can be created in an equitable way.

There is clearly a sensitivity to cultures and value systems in both projects, which George Mwangi (2017) identifies as a basis for mutual collaboration and which Hayhoe (1989) describes as 'a non-dominating knowledge interaction process'. Collaboration Project I which is EU-funded but led by a non-EU university would appear to provide counterevidence to the observation of Hagenmeier (2017) that power generally lies with the funder. This also runs counter to the common scenario observed by Sidhu 2006 whereby countries of the Global North typically position themselves as benefactor. Collaboration Project II, with partners from the Global South joining the project by invitation of the main partner, has features that resemble the traditional donor-recipient model, reflected by the comment that other partners were 'on the receiving end' of the project. It should be noted, however, that the long-term aim of the project is for all partners to make contributions as they build their online teaching and learning capacity.

In Collaboration Project I, European participants made overt reference to decolonisation as an important feature of their co-operation, such as in the description of 'plural ways of knowing', which mitigates the lasting influence of European colonisation identified by Stein (2017) and the cultural dominance that often pervades collaboration (Findlay et al 2012). The idea expressed that UK institutions may need to rethink their approach to partnerships with a greater acknowledgement of equity, demonstrates a strong desire to affect change away from Eurocentric curriculums observed by Pimblott (2020). Interviews with participants of Collaboration Project II did not refer to decolonisation by name. However, the removal of the descriptors 'master' and 'slave' when labelling servers in this project demonstrates a sensitivity towards decolonising language.

The development of collaboration between countries of the Global South was identified by some participants as a means of achieving more equitable power relationships. This South-South collaboration, however, may also be open to inequalities, as McKie (2021a) observes with the apparent dominance of South Africa on the African continent. Something not seen in the literature was the idea

that institutions in Global South need to exhibit a sense of agency in their partnership activities and not disempower themselves through low self-fulfilling expectations. This connects with the view of a UK-based participant that partners in the Global South sometimes worked on the assumption of the Global North having primacy and therefore aims of equity were not necessarily shared by partners.

Diversity, equity and inclusion were seen by participants of Collaboration Project I to be supported at a faculty and programme level by the implementation of COIL projects and comprehensive internationalisation, therefore modelling good practice in international collaboration. This echoes the view of Webb (2005) and Caruana and Ploner (2010) and reflects the inclusion benefits of comprehensive internationalisation identified by De Wit (2015) with a focus on learning outcomes for all students rather than on relatively expensive mobility for a minority.

The **organisational structure** of institutions was cited by some participants as a key determinant of success in their partnerships, notably the hierarchical relationship between academics and university management. A European participant reasoned that flatter hierarchies, more common in institutions of the Global North, facilitate sustainable partnerships, in contrast to universities that have a vertical hierarchy with academics unable to take responsibility for collaboration. This resonates with the observation of Hunter et al. (2018) and Eddy (2010) that Erasmus+ partnerships are mainly initiated by academics and faculties, by which international disciplinary networks are formed (Klemencic 2017). This would also reflect the importance of 'ground-level' partnerships, identified by Eddy 2010 and Kim (2017), in which the transnational mobile academic becomes the principal broker of collaborations. The drawback of having ownership at faculty level was highlighted by Levine 2000 who observed that academics are mobile between institutions. This points to the need for universities, while situating ownership within faculties, attending to continuity and

succession in their partnerships to mitigate against academic mobility. Difficulties may also arise in a collaboration where ownership is located differently between partners, as one participant pointed out, making communication 'super-challenging'.

    (iv)   Research Question 4: What principles, approaches and strategies will enable SDG-compliant international partnerships to thrive and be resilient long-term post-COVID?

The themes of responses to this research question were often the distilled thoughts of participants, referencing the previous questions. Due to limitations of time in interviews, the responses were often briefer than for the other research questions.

In terms of **models of collaboration**, the findings support collaboration over co-operation Alter and Hage (1993) and that collaboration is about looking jointly for solutions beyond individual visions Gray (1989). Among Altbach and Knight's (2007) rationales for collaboration, while economic motives have dominated, the social and academic reasons for collaborating derive genuine benefits. Similarly, cultural understanding, and capacity building can be usefully prioritised over competition for talent and revenue generation (Vincent-Lancrin 2009).

A pattern emerged among participants of Collaboration Project I in which principles of **equity** were overtly predominant in creating sustainable partnerships. These principles were shared as much by Europe-based participants – 'we focus on equality and decolonisation' – as by participants in South Africa.

In the other case study project, the only explicit reference to equity in partnerships was made from a UN agency perspective, promoting more equitable power dynamics as a policy goal. This is not to say that objectives of equity were

absent in the latter project, but it is notable that such principles were not foregrounded.

The principle of equity was closely tied to power dynamics and agency, in that partnerships between Global South countries increase agency and create more equal power relationships. Encouragement to develop greater agency among institutions of the Global South was given by one participant, while at a project level the benefits of videoconferencing was having an empowering effect to allow everyone to talk on equal terms. The flattening of hierarchies was therefore held as an approach to creating sustainable partnerships. This supports the argument put forward by Orton (2000) for an assessment of the power differential in any partnership followed by an attempt to reduce it, to achieve what Hayhoe (1989) describes as 'mutual transformation'.

The related principles of diversity and inclusion were advocated by participants of Collaboration Project I, through the application of COIL and 'internationalisation for all', contrasting with physical mobility which benefits only a minority of staff and students and thus is less inclusive. Principles of equity, diversity and inclusion are enshrined in the UN SDGs, which were cited explicitly by two participants, most strongly at the policy level by the participant working for a UN agency. This might suggest that while SDGs increasingly inform international collaboration, they are one of several competing objectives among global partners and may not always be foregrounded.

Another strategy put forward in response to this question was to advocate for multilateral **consortia**, as having greater benefits in creating more sustainable partnerships over bi-lateral collaborations, which Tadaki and Tremewan (2013) cites as fostering broader thinking. Marginson (2011) also sees consortia as having greater global interconnectedness. Consortia that include at least some of its members from the Global South would add to the capacity to be sustainable.

This configuration is supported by the SDG Bergen 21 (2021) online conference, emphasising more equitable partnerships that allow networking between countries of the Global South.

In addition, participants from Collaboration Project II advocated for partnerships to involve **industry** as a driver of employability and as providers of online educational technology. These views support Chan (2004) and Kinser and Green (2009) who argue that successful collaborations involve partners having complementary skills and expertise. Besides this, the principle of interdisciplinarity in partnerships was highlighted by some participants of Collaboration Project I, reflecting the description of best practice COIL projects by de Wit 2013. The findings also connect with Rudzki (1995) identifying the need for buy-in and internationalised professional development.

There was a notable distinction in emphasis between participants of the two case study projects in what underpinned the success of the collaboration. In the case of Collaboration Project I, an investment in developing **interpersonal** relationships and 'trust capital' was a common theme. The creation of the 'Friday cuppa' event which allowed partners to meet online in a voluntary and informal way was cited as a central driver of stronger interpersonal relationships, beyond previous face-to-face models. This supports the views of Brandenburg (2016), Ma and Montgomery (2021) and Hoellerman et al (2009) who observed the importance of trust and the personal relationships in sustainable partnerships.

In Collaboration Project II the key element was cited as good design and relevant content, referred to by one participant as the 'meat'. Good design was framed in terms of aiming to solve a real-life problem and being a research problem of common interest, ideally of a global scale. This would support the view of Lanford (2020) who asserts that partnerships need to align with the ethical and social missions of higher education. While the relationships between project partners is

important, the absence of any overt reference to the interpersonal element is interesting and suggests a functional approach to the project. It may also be a reflection of different cultural values in what is openly expressed and what is implied in a partnership, which relates to what [Killick 2016](#) describes as the hidden curriculum of different intercultural influences.

(v) Conclusion

The research interviews conducted thus gave several findings that were consistent with existing research, while some responses had not been previously noted in the literature. Certain patterns can be observed from the findings, relating to relationship-based versus content-based approaches, responses to the global pandemic in the modes of internationalisation, themes of equity, diversity and inclusion, and how the political environment can be navigated. These patterns will be explored in the final section.

6. Conclusions and recommendations

This study has aimed to contribute to the field of research on international HE partnerships, by mapping existing literature against the responses of leaders and practitioners in two case studies. Both projects had been initiated before the global pandemic emerged and therefore had to adapt to rapid changes in the global environment without the capability to travel freely. The study has attempted to place these responses within the context of other global influences such as nationalism in general and Brexit in particular in the UK.

This section draws together conclusions of how international HE partnerships can thrive in the long-term in the current global context and provides

recommendations at policy, institutional and faculty levels for facilitating successful collaboration.

(i)   Relationship-based versus content-based approaches - hidden curriculum of cultures in HE

The conscious investment in the interpersonal domain in Collaborative Project I, notably through the introduction of the 'Friday cuppa', reverberated through the interviews with all participants of that project as a highly positive intervention. Such intentional emphasis on developing interpersonal relationships through informal online activities had clearly had a major impact on the project partners, who observed the improved quality of working relationships from this, with a degree of surprise that the online mode had been capable of providing such a good outcome. The pandemic had acted as a catalyst and project partners had developed a creative solution that was an improvement over the status quo ante. The positive impact was such that that even when international travel becomes possible, the 'Friday cuppa' will remain a fixture in projects.

On the other hand, participants of Collaborative Project II made little explicit reference to the interpersonal domain, with emphasis instead being on understanding partners at a technical level, related to IT capability, and on ensuring that the project content was of high-quality and relevant to partners. Relationships within the project seemed cordial and professional but appeared to be implicit within the project's technical and educational objectives.

This differing approach can be viewed through the lens of hidden curriculum, extending the meaning beyond its original use within an institution to include the implicit values of a partnership and its intercultural influences (Killick 2016). The implicit values of Collaboration Project I would seem to encourage and facilitate consciously collegiate ways of communicating with a strong emphasis on

intercultural competence. This models one of the key benefits of COIL around which the project is based since intercultural skills are a central aim of this mode of internationalisation. Nevertheless, this also reflects the conscious attempt by partners of Global North and South to create equitable and close relationships, in turn reflecting the culture of their institutions and the individual personalities taking part. It was notable that Ubuntu was explicitly referred to by a participant in South Africa as a collectivist guiding principle for creating partnerships, which had been enthusiastically adopted by other project partners. While contrasting with the strong individualist tendencies at play within Western cultures, the application of Ubuntu principles to how partners interact can be seen as a highly positive contribution to sustainable partnerships.

At an institutional level, ownership of collaboration located within faculties helps 'ground-level' partnerships to grow, where the 'transnational mobile academic' brokers the partnership. Difficulties may arise where one partner has ownership located within university management, in which case communication may be problematic across different areas within partner institutions.

(ii)   Responses to the global pandemic in the modes of internationalisation

The global pandemic evidently demonstrated the vulnerabilities of existing models of international collaboration but has at the same presented opportunities for positive change. Specifically, reliance on physical mobility as the principal mode of internationalisation was shown to be very fragile and serves only a small proportion of staff and students. Nevertheless, the circumstances caused by the pandemic which enforced an emergency shift to online modes across higher education appear to have led to a realisation that these modes brough major benefits and were 'a game changer'.

The online approaches to internationalisation such as COIL had existed for some years before the pandemic, but it seems its emergence acted as a catalyst for change and greater acceptance of virtual collaboration and more broadly the approaches of Internationalisation at Home and Internationalisation of the Curriculum. The principal teaching and learning benefits of virtual exchange were seen to be a closer tie-in with learning outcomes for all and the development of intercultural competence. Furthermore, virtual collaboration was seen to have advantages of supporting intercultural competence, equity and diversity in such projects. This presents a potential watershed for internationalisation of HE with the strong reservation that institutions may quickly revert to 'commercialised internationalisation' once global travel restarts, such is the strong pull of marketisation in the sector.

Alongside this, the structure of funding, which currently supports largely expensive physical mobility, requires reform to channel funds towards staff development to enable the provision of virtual exchanges.

(iii)   Themes of equity, diversity and inclusion that are central to the UN SDGs

Collaboration projects that are formally tied to UN SDGs, such as the two case studies, have equity, diversity and inclusion enshrined. These policy objectives can only be realised by the actions of institutions and individuals when developing partnerships, to create what Hayhoe (1989) describes as 'a balanced and non-dominating knowledge interaction process'.

Equity can be realised by creating partnerships with equitable power relationships and where Global South partners maximise their agency. This may be complicated by project sponsors being largely from the Global North, which can create an imbalance of power, but conscious equalising of power can be

achieved by Global North partners pulling back from traditionally lead roles and Global South partners focusing on ways to enhance their agency. The development of multi-lateral consortia over simple bi-lateral partnerships supports more equitable collaborations and facilitates the potential for South-South co-operation. Another important element of achieving global equity is for governments and institutions to work to mitigate the digital divide that causes many countries in the Global South to miss the benefit from innovative online modes of collaboration.

Following Altbach and Knight (2007), institutions would be acting transparently by making explicit their rationales for specific collaborations - social, political, economic and academic. Equally the four agendas observed by Vincent-Lancrin (2009) that underpin internationalisation - cultural understanding, competition for talent, revenue generation and capacity building – are useful ways of calibrating a partnership. In addition, metrics for sustainable goals such as through the THE Impact Rankings (THE 2021) need universal adoption in partnerships, not only to measure impact but as motivation to create more sustainable collaborations.

(iv)   Navigating the global political environment

In a political environment where nationalist tendencies have worked against collaboration in a general sense, the UK's departure from the EU has put UK institutions at a disadvantage in funding international partnerships. The long-term position of the UK HE sector remains unclear but highly precarious; indications are that the loss of Erasmus+ funding will not be mitigated by the introduction of the Turing scheme. This may accelerate the decline of UK global soft power and require UK institutions to recalibrate their habitus (Bourdieu's 1986) with a redoubling of a decolonised approach. The drive towards a 'Global Britain', on the evidence so far, remains a 'superficial branding exercise' (Johnston 2018) that is 'strong on rhetoric, weak on substance' (Hutton 2021).

At the same time, it can be foreseen that China's global soft power will continue to rise through its commitment to collaborations, especially with countries within the Belt and Road Initiative. This means that the UK and the rest of the world needs to adapt to a changing world order in which internationalisation is organised by values other than Western, Anglo-centric concepts. By recalibrating partnerships by principles of equity, diversity and inclusion on a national and global scale, UK institutions will be able to develop partnerships with greater mutuality and shared values.

There is a long-term need for UK institutions to maintain collaboration with partners in China, despite the current downturn in the geopolitical and trade climate, to avoid the fracturing of international education into separate blocs. Despite concerns about academic freedom, engagement in areas such as climate change, vaccines, and Artificial Intelligence (AI) require global collaboration.

This study has presented challenges in terms of complexity in the way that the global influences, including COVID, nationalism and other factors, are continuously interacting and are interwoven. It has also posed the challenge of connecting with eight participants in six different countries with up to an 8-hour time difference, and in the case of one institution a lengthy approval process. This itself may capture how an institution's organisational structure may facilitate or otherwise the conversations that lead to international collaboration.

I intend this non-definitive study to inform my professional practice and to form the basis of further dissemination. It has been appropriate to conduct this study with the participants in a collaborative way. As a close-to-practice researcher who is also a practitioner in international collaborations, the conversations in interviews were balanced in terms of power relations. The scope of the study has been broad, to which follow-on studies would add greater depth in individual

themes of COIL and virtual collaboration, funding of collaboration, the impact of Brexit on UK institutions' partnerships and the role of China in international education. It would also be of interest to conduct a longitudinal study to trace the long-term effect of the global pandemic on partnerships.

The COVID-19 pandemic, unique in living memory in its global impact, has brought about necessary short-term change and the opportunity for long-term change towards more sustainable forms of partnerships. However, the commercialised model that has dominated the UK sector and the loss of funding for a sector already financially vulnerable may be barriers to long-term change in how institutions build their international collaborations. UK institutions that look beyond the short-term domestic political climate to look outwards in building partnerships will fulfil their social role and benefit in the long term. By placing principles of equity in the foreground of partnership building, prioritising their social and ethical missions, institutions have the potential to create more sustainable collaborations.

(v)   Recommendations

The study prompts the following recommendations:

Faculty/interpersonal level
1. Make intentional investment in the interpersonal relationships within partnerships, by maximising the benefits of online interactions, following the lead of the 'Friday cuppa' activity.
2. As far as possible within the institutional context, take responsibility for creating and developing international collaboration at faculty level.
3. Explore collectivist philosophies with partners, such as Ubuntu, to help create a deliberately collaborative culture in each partnership, as part of its explicit curriculum.

4. Develop the use of COIL as a default approach in comprehensive internationalisation, with its benefits of inclusion, equity, diversity, interculturality and interdisciplinarity.

Institutional level

5. Promote comprehensive internationalisation and locate responsibility for partnerships in faculties and research centres, with the International Office performing a supporting partner role.
6. Be transparent in making explicit the motivations for each partnership, with criteria from Altbach and Knight (2007) and Vincent-Lancrin (2009).
7. Maintain a balance of partnerships that are not exclusively driven by economic and political concerns and that foreground academic and social motives.
8. Integrate SDGs into the internationalisation strategy, using UN SDSN (2017) and UN SDSN (2020) as guides, and prioritise the THE Impact Rankings (THE 2021) to measure and provide motivation towards sustainable practices.
9. Become an institutional member of the UN Sustainable Development Solutions Network (SDSN).
10. Maintain the closest possible relationships with relevant European partners, to mitigate the effects of Brexit and to take a long-term view of European collaboration.
11. Decolonise the habitus of the institution to build equitable partnerships with the Global South that do not assume Global North leadership and that consciously give agency to Global South partners.
12. Prioritise the social and ethical mission of the institution for the public good, mitigating the commercialised values of the sector and the nationalist climate, to orientate the institution for sustainable partnerships.
13. Develop consortia and networks for partnerships, to complement bi-lateral collaborations.

UK national policy level

14. Direct funding to support professional development for comprehensive internationalisation in general and virtual collaboration in particular.

15. Facilitate the closest possible partnerships with European countries to mitigate the damage from Brexit.

16. Take a long-term view of collaboration with China in international education by identifying shared objectives and key areas for co-operation.

17. Decolonise dialogue with countries of the Global South to facilitate collaboration conversations that are free of post-colonial assumptions.

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8. Appendices

Appendix A: UN Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs)

The 17 sustainable development goals (SDGs):

GOAL 1: No Poverty

GOAL 2: Zero Hunger

GOAL 3: Good Health and Well-being

GOAL 4: Quality Education

GOAL 5: Gender Equality

GOAL 6: Clean Water and Sanitation

GOAL 7: Affordable and Clean Energy

GOAL 8: Decent Work and Economic Growth

GOAL 9: Industry, Innovation and Infrastructure

GOAL 10: Reduced Inequality

GOAL 11: Sustainable Cities and Communities

GOAL 12: Responsible Consumption and Production

GOAL 13: Climate Action

GOAL 14: Life Below Water

GOAL 15: Life on Land

GOAL 16: Peace and Justice Strong Institutions

GOAL 17: Partnerships to achieve the Goal

United Nations (2015)

Appendix B: Case study protocol

The case study protocol included an agreement on:

- gaining formal institutional access and informed participant consent
- ensuring that participants experience no emotional, psychological or physical harm
- conducting and recording interviews online on an encrypted BCU platform through MS Teams
- the auto-generation of captions to create transcripts in MS Stream
- the secure and confidential storage of data on OneDrive
- the limits on data disclosure
- the retention of data only for the duration of the dissertation
- ensuring respondents understand how data will be used including off-the-record statements
- a de-briefing offered for all participants after each interview
- participants being identified only by generic identifiers
- English as the language medium for the study
- the right of participants to withdraw at any stage

I followed closely the requirements of:

- British Educational Research Association (BERA 2018)
- HELS Standard Operating Procedures (BCU 2020a)
- BCU Guide and Forms (BCU 2020b)
- BCU policies and guidance relating to research integrity (BCU 2020c)
- BCU Guidance for internet-mediated research (BCU 2020d)

In addition, I completed the online BCU Ethics Application (BCU 2020e).

The study is designed to comply with the provisions of the Equality Act 2010 and Data Protection Act 2018, and supported neurodiversity by giving the option for

the participant's camera to be switched off ([National Autistic Society 2010](#)). I aimed to be mindful of the hidden curriculum of different intercultural influences ([Killick 2016](#)), including the varying financial resources available.

The interviews were conducted and recorded on MS Teams, with the exception of one interview which was held on alternative platform by request of the participant and stored on a secure and encrypted BCU platform (MS Stream and One Drive). Automated transcripts created in MS Stream were proofread and corrected for errors, with the final transcripts saved in MS Excel. The data will be retained only until the completion of the dissertation.

Appendix C: Case study correspondence

Access request letter

School of Education and Social Work
Birmingham City University
City South Campus
Westbourne Road
Birmingham, B15 3TN
United Kingdom
[date]

Dear [form of address] [family name]

Re: Request for research access
I am writing to you to request permission to interview [name of participant] as part of my research study.

I am studying on the Master's in Education at Birmingham City University and for my dissertation I have formulated the study title 'How can sustainable international higher education (HE) partnerships thrive post-2020?' I recognise that the [project*] is a major global collaboration and, especially in the light of the COVID-19 pandemic, I believe it will be valuable to understand in depth what makes a successful partnership model in the post-COVID world.

I have given greater detail about my research study and its protocols in the table below this letter, a version of which will be made available to [name of participant] on first contact. I would be grateful for your authorisation to approach [him/her] for this purpose. To assist me in my research planning, I would be very grateful for a reply before 18th December 2020.

Looking forward to your reply.

Kindest regards

Paul Wilson
[Email signature]

Study title	How can sustainable international higher education (HE) partnerships thrive post-2020?
About the researcher	I have worked in international education for 33 years, initially as an EFL teacher and teacher trainer and then leading the Short Course Unit at University of Warwick. Since 2016 I have worked in a consulting role to help UK universities to build long-term collaborative partnerships, especially with institutions and enterprises in China. I am studying for the Master's in Education at Birmingham City University on a part-time basis.
Introduction to the research	The development of international partnerships post-COVID is of great significance to the sector in renewing its relevance as a positive social force. This study aims to provide an advance in knowledge in the current global circumstances and to inform professional practice for a professional audience.
Research aims	This direct research aims to explore how professionals working in HE internationalisation view the impact of COVID-19 on international partnerships in general and specifically how they perceive successful models of partnerships post-COVID.
Research questions	In order to address and realise the objectives of the research, I have formulated the following research questions: 5. What is the impact of COVID-19 on the development of international higher education partnerships in the short, medium and long term? 6. How do the effects of COVID-19 interact with the context of other recent global and national events? 7. To what extent do the selected case studies provide a model of international collaboration that will meet UN SDGs, set out in '2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development'?

	8. What principles, approaches and strategies will enable SDG-compliant international partnerships to thrive and be resilient long-term post-COVID?
Invitation to participate	The purpose of this information leaflet is to inform you about the project. If there are outstanding operational questions about the study, please email Paul.Wilson2@mail.bcu.ac.uk
Reason for invitation	I would like to invite [name of participant] to participate as a key member of the [*project], since the case study forms a key part of my research study. Their contribution would therefore be highly valuable to my research. [*project that is relevant to the particular participant will be referenced]
Voluntary Participation	Participation is entirely voluntary and will not have any foreseen adverse effects. A **Participant Consent Form** (attached) will be sent to [participant name] once participation is confirmed, for formal authorisation.
Expectations if consent is given	If consent is given, I will arrange a mutually convenient time for an online interview, lasting 45-60 minutes on MS Teams. The target period for interviews is between 11th January and 5th February 2021. The interview will be recorded onto MS Stream for the purpose of researcher transcription and data analysis. English will be the medium used during research. As a former lecturer and teacher trainer in English as a Foreign Language, I will moderate the use of English to suit all participants. If the interview is preferred without video, a voice-only call will be equally suitable.
Potential benefits of participation	No financial reimbursement will be made. It is hoped that participation will allow the further dissemination of good practice within the case studies.
Potential risks of participation	I will endeavour to maintain high levels of trust and ethical standards, ensuring that participants experience no emotional, psychological or physical harm.
Confidentiality and Data protection	At all stages of the study from collection of data, storage of data, analysis, interpretation and writing up, confidentiality will be a priority, through:

	- secure and confidential storage of data on OneDrive on an encrypted Birmingham City University platform - no disclosure of data to third parties - retention of data abiding by the *Data Protection Act 2018* - data retained only for the duration of the dissertation, after which it will be deleted - data will be used only for the specific purposes of the research study - off-the-record statements will only be used with the clear permission of the participant - a de-briefing offered for all participants after the interview - participants being identified only by generic identifiers - the opportunity to review the transcription after the interview and a de-briefing will be offered
Participant's rights	[participant name] has the right to fully informed consent and to withdraw from the study at any stage (without prejudice). They have the right to anonymity and to data protection.
Funding	The research is not funded by any external organisation
Supervisor	This research is supervised by Beverley Cole *@bcu.ac.uk, School of Education and Social Work, City South Campus, Westbourne Road, Birmingham, B15 3TN, United Kingdom. https://www.bcu.ac.uk/education-and-social-work
Supervisor contact details	If you have questions or concerns about the study, please contact Beverley Cole *@bcu.ac.uk , Birmingham City University
Complaints	If you would like to make a complaint, please contact either HELS_Ethics@bcu.ac.uk
Researcher contact details	You are welcome to contact me: Paul Wilson Paul.Wilson2@mail.bcu.ac.uk +44 (0)7818 027***

Participant Consent Form

BIRMINGHAM CITY
University

PARTICIPANT CONSENT FORM

Study Title: How can sustainable international higher education (HE) partnerships thrive post-2020?

Name of Researcher: Paul Wilson   *Student No.:* 19156057

Project Code: *Participant identification number:*

7783		0	0	0	1

Please initial

1. I confirm that I have read the Participant Information Sheet [v.4, 1 December 2020] for this study. I have had the opportunity to consider the information, ask questions and have had these answered satisfactorily.	
2. I understand that my participation is voluntary and that I am free to withdraw at any time without giving any reason, without my legal rights being affected.	
3. I understand that relevant sections of my data collected during the study may be looked at by individuals from Birmingham City University and from regulatory authorities, where it is relevant to my taking part in this research. I give permission for these individuals to have access to my records.	
4. I understand that personal data about me will be collected for the purposes of the research study including name, role and institution, and that these will be processed in accordance with the information sheet [v.4, 1 December 2020].	
5. I agree to audio/video recording and the use of anonymised quotes in research reports and publications.	
6. I agree to take part in this study.	

Name of participant	Date	Signature

Name of researcher	Date	Signature

Participant Information Sheet

Study Title: How can sustainable international higher education (HE) partnerships thrive post-2020?

Name of Researcher: Paul Wilson   *Student No.*: 19156057

Study title	How can sustainable international higher education (HE) partnerships thrive post-2020?
About the researcher	I have worked in international education for 33 years, initially as an EFL teacher and teacher trainer and then leading the Short Course Unit at University of Warwick, building partnerships through long-term bespoke programmes. Since 2016 I have worked in a consulting role to help UK universities to build sustainable collaborative partnerships, especially with institutions and enterprises in China. I am currently studying for the Master's in Education at Birmingham City University on a part-time basis.
Introduction to the research	The development of international partnerships post-COVID is of great significance to the sector in renewing its relevance as a positive social force. This study aims to provide an advance in knowledge in the current global circumstances and to inform professional practice for a professional audience.
Research aims	This direct research aims to explore how professionals working in HE internationalisation view the impact of COVID-19 on international partnerships in general and specifically how they perceive successful models of partnerships post-COVID.
Research questions	In order to address and realise the objectives of the research, I have formulated the following research questions: 1. What is the impact of COVID-19 on the development of international higher education partnerships in the short, medium and long term? 2. How do the effects of COVID-19 interact with the context of other recent global and national events?

	3. To what extent do the selected case studies provide a model of international collaboration that will meet UN SDGs, set out in '2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development'? 4. What principles, approaches and strategies will enable SDG-compliant international partnerships to thrive and be resilient long-term post-COVID?
Provisional interview schedule	• Introductions and thanks from researcher • Introduction to research topic • Interview questions: o How has COVID-19 impacted the international partnerships that you are involved in, in the first 3 months of the pandemic and up to the first 12 months? o What do you think may be the longer-term impacts on your partnership projects, over the next 3-5 years? o Thinking of the rise of national populism in recent years and the departure of UK from the EU, how does the effect of COVID-19 interplay with those trends and events? o In what ways does the project* provide a model of international collaboration that both meets the UN SDGs and the demands of a post-COVID world? o Can you describe what you believe are the key principles and strategies of thriving and resilient international partnerships in the post-COVID world? • Participant gives concluding remarks; researcher summarises the key points of the conversation and thanks participant • Interview concludes
Invitation to participate	The purpose of this information leaflet is to inform you about the project so that you can decide whether you/your colleague would like to take part through an online interview between 11th January and 5th February 2021. If there are outstanding operational questions about the study, please email Paul.Wilson2@mail.bcu.ac.uk
Reason for invitation	You have been invited to participate as a key member of the project*, since the case study forms a key part of my research study. Your contribution would therefore be highly valuable to my research. [*project that is relevant to the particular participant will be referenced]
Voluntary Participation	As participation is entirely voluntary, non-participation is entirely your choice and will not have any foreseen adverse effects.

Expectations if consent is given	If consent is given, I will arrange a mutually convenient time for an online interview, lasting 45-60 minutes on MS Teams. The interview will be recorded onto MS Stream for the purpose of researcher transcription and data analysis. English will be the medium used during research. As a former lecturer and teacher trainer in English as a Foreign Language, I will moderate the use of English to suit all participants. If you prefer to conduct the interview without video, a voice-only call will be equally suitable.
Potential benefits of participation	No financial reimbursement will be made. It is hoped that participation will allow the further dissemination of good practice within the case studies.
Potential risks of participation	I will endeavour to maintain high levels of trust and ethical standards, ensuring that participants experience no emotional, psychological or physical harm.
Confidentiality and Data protection	At all stages of the study from collection of data, storage of data, analysis, interpretation and writing up, confidentiality will be a priority, through: - secure and confidential storage of data on OneDrive on an encrypted University platform - no disclosure of data to third parties - retention of data abiding by the *Data Protection Act 2018* - data retained only for the duration of the dissertation, after which it will be deleted - data will be used only for the specific purposes of the research study - off-the-record statements will only be used with the clear permission of the participant - a de-briefing offered for all participants after the interview - participants being identified only by generic identifiers - the opportunity to review the transcription after the interview and a de-briefing will be offered

Participant's rights	You have the right to fully informed consent and to withdraw from the study at any stage (without prejudice). You have the right to anonymity and to data protection.
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Supervisor	This research is supervised by Beverley Cole *@bcu.ac.uk, School of Education and Social Work, City South Campus, Westbourne Road, Birmingham, B15 3TN, United Kingdom. https://www.bcu.ac.uk/education-and-social-work
Supervisor contact details	If you have questions or concerns about the study, please contact Beverley Cole *@bcu.ac.uk , Birmingham City University
Complaints	If you would like to make a complaint, please contact either HELS_Ethics@bcu.ac.uk
Researcher contact details	You are welcome to contact me: Paul Wilson Paul.Wilson2@mail.bcu.ac.uk +44 (0)7818 027615
Providing informed consent	If you are happy to participate in this study, please give your consent by providing an electronic signature on the **Participant Consent Form**.