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The role of social networks in the formation of transnational higher education partnership: a case study of a British university and a Qatari education institute

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ABSTRACT

Transnational higher education (TNE) became the dominant higher education arrangement in the Middle East. This article reports on the role of individuals in setting up TNE partnerships between a Qatari educational institute (A) and a British university (B). It aims to understand 'How do the individual relationship dynamics shape the establishment of a TNE partnership between (A and B)?' we interviewed Six individuals who participated in the establishment of the partnership, and analysed the data thematically. The theories of 'Social Capital' and 'the Strength of Weak Ties' enabled us to understand the findings that revealed three main themes: Social Networks, Trusted Friendship, and Shared Benefits. The study could offer higher education administrators, policymakers, and practitioners valuable insights into the importance of social networks.

Introduction

Globalisation has encouraged twenty-first century higher education institutions (HEIs) towards international partnerships (Altbach and Knight 2007), which has, in return, turned HEIs into 'a global business engaging in marketing strategies to sell their knowledge-based products, attract foreign students, and establish international branches' (Spring 2014). HEIs in countries such as the USA, Canada, the UK and Australia are the main competitors in exporting higher education to developing countries in Asia and the Middle East (Healey 2018). Governments, agencies, and regional associations have promoted international higher education partnerships globally. For example, the World University Rankings now considers international collaboration as one of the key criteria in universities' rankings.

Despite the popularity of transnational higher education (TNE) partnerships in the last two decades, multiple studies (Ayoubi and Al-Habaibeh 2006; Kale, Singh, and Perlmutter 2000; Kanter 1994; Wilkins and Huisman 2012) have discussed the challenges facing involved partners in maintaining sustainable partnerships. However, less is known about the individual dynamics in shaping the partnerships from early discussions

between partners. A dynamic individual refers to someone who is responsible for setting up a cross-national partnership between transnational and higher educational institutions.

This case study focuses on the role of individuals in setting up a TNE partnership between a Qatari educational institute (A) and a British university (B). The research question addressed answer is 'How does the individual relationship dynamics shape the establishment of TNE partnership between (A and B)?' Understanding the dynamics of relationships at the early stages of forming the partnership between higher education members from two different countries can provide insights into what characteristics help build a successful partnership.

Internationalisation of higher education in the United Kingdom

The internationalisation of higher education has multiple definitions (Knight 2003); defined it as 'the process of integrating an international, intercultural or global dimension into the purpose, functions or delivery of post-secondary education'. Several factors that led HEIs to engage in TNE programme arrangements include commercial, reputation and research involvement (Brandenburg 2012). Other motivations have paid little attention to the literature, such as widening the network of international alumni who will act as ambassadors for these universities, internationalising the curriculum and building a multicultural campus. Despite the mentioned benefits, multiple studies (Ahmad and Buchanan 2016; Healey 2013; Leung and Waters 2013; Olcott 2009) have, for the last two decades, discussed why HEIs decided to engage in international partnerships in varied countries. It is noticeable that diversifying income is a common and strong factor that motivated HEIs to take the step of going abroad. Next, we focus on providing a background on British universities' motivations for engaging with international partnerships.

HEIs in Western countries have been negatively impacted by severe cuts in public expenditure. For example, in the United Kingdom, government funding for universities was significantly reduced, which forced British universities to look for several markets beyond their borders (Maringe, Foskett, and Woodfield 2013). The reduction of government funding, coupled with the increased demand for higher education around the globe, has made British universities diversify their revenue through participating in international partnerships and promoting the provision of quality education (Healey 2020). Meanwhile, international partnerships such as franchise programmes and articulation agreements are considered more sustainable in terms of recruiting international students compared to recruiting them to the main campus (Olcott 2009).

The promotion of British education was supported by efforts introduced by the government, which introduced three policies concerned with the internationalisation of higher education: Prime Minister's Initiative 1 and 2 (PMI and PMI2) and the International Education Strategy. The ultimate goal of these initiatives was to match the competitors in the international higher education market, such as Australia and the USA, through branding UK education globally (Blair 1999, 2006; Great Britain, Department for Business 2013). Beyond these initiatives, other factors positioned the UK within the international higher education market. Furthermore (Lomer 2017), discussed the history of British imperial networks in the last two centuries that

established colonies around the world. This might indicate the symbolic power that British degrees have gained. Additionally, four out of six main destinations for students regarding their studies in higher education use the English language as a medium for teaching; these destinations are the USA, the UK, Canada and Australia. Accordingly, we believe these initiatives and factors have generated a good reputation for UK higher education quality and made the UK an attractive destination for students globally.

According to The Quality Assurance Agency for Higher Education (2020), there are more than 600,000 students studying for a British degree award outside the UK in 226 different locations. The Middle East region is one of the key locations for western HEIs due to the government's initiative in reforming education to build human capital. Around one-third of the total TNE programmes internationally are located within the Arabian Gulf (Ahmed 2019; Bridi 2020; Miller-Idriss and Hanauer 2011). Understanding how these programmes are established and how actors facilitate the establishment of these partnerships is essential for both education importers and exporters to build sustainable partnerships.

Higher education in Qatar

The State of Qatar is a small country located within the Arabian Gulf that has abundant oil and natural gas resources, which has facilitated and spurred a massive transformation in the economic, environmental and human development sectors (Mustafa et al. 2018). The higher education sector started in 1973 with the establishment of the largest and one of three public universities in the country that provides free education for its citizens. In 2002 and 2008, respectively, the government introduced two initiatives, the Education for a New Era reform and the launching of Qatar National Vision 2030 (QNV2030), which aims to transform the tiny state into a modern country by advocating and championing human and economic development (Brewer et al. 2007; Planning Statistics Authority 2020). These initiatives are anticipated to develop its citizens by providing access to postsecondary programmes through multiple partnerships with international partner universities, mainly from the USA and UK (Khalifa et al. 2016; Mustafa et al. 2018). Until 2016, the country had mainly attracted international universities from the USA and Canada. However, since 2017, many British universities have entered the market by partnering with different education providers in the country. Currently, there are more than 29 higher education institutes that offer a range of postsecondary degrees with the aim of supporting QNV2030 (Ministry of Education and Higher Education 2020); however, only six of these universities are from the UK. While there are multiple studies in the literature that have discussed Qatar's model of attracting foreign universities primarily from the USA (Ahmed 2019; Brewer et al. 2007; Khodr 2011; Lemke-Westcott and Johnson 2013; Mustafa et al. 2018), none of them have discussed Qatar's partnerships with British universities.

Literature review

Organisations and business research often describe a 'partnership' as a way of gaining a benefit in the marketplace, which can offer partners access to new revenue streams, increasing delivery of a wider range of products to a wider range of people and access

to new knowledge (Mohr and Spekman 1994). International higher education partnership discourse is no different; with a massive increase in the last two decades, it has become a defining feature of twenty-first century higher education systems (Sanders and Wong 2020). Additionally, partnerships between HEIs have become a transformative tool for universities, student experience and research advancement, besides, professional training can occur at individual, departmental or institutional levels. One of the popular approaches towards integrating international strategies is the development of partnerships with overseas HEIs, where students can study within their home country and graduate with foreign qualifications. This type of arrangement, which is also defined as a franchise or TNE partnership agreement, is highly complex and requires partners to actively collaborate to maximise the benefit (Koehn and Obamba 2012).

Partners strive to succeed in achieving a sustainable partnership and satisfies the anticipated objectives; one of the best advices stresses the importance of having a common goal between partners (Brookes and Becket 2011). Bolton and Nie (2010) illustrated the opportunities and tensions associated with the management of TNE educational partnerships between a Chinese and Australian university. They found that a TNE partnership's success depends on the successful outcome of the interactions and negotiations between faculty members in both institutions. Research led by (Heffernan and Poole 2005) discussed the required factors for successful international partnerships and reported 'effective communication, trust and commitment' as essential factors (Heffernan and Poole 2005, 237). Although their studies were not explicitly focused on TNE partnerships, their work recognises the importance of relationship management and social capital between individuals, which are critical in the early stages of developing sustainable partnerships.

While many articles used in this research agree that the financial factors are one of the main motivations of HEIs, it is crucial to realise that universities should not make narrow decisions based on only such dimension; rather, they should holistically consider multiple motivations. It is also crucial to consider whether to engage in the establishment of international partnerships from the home university perspective (Wilkins and Huisman 2012). Additionally, the International Partnership Managers should be aware of cultural nuances and business practices in the countries they are planning to engage with. Individuals involved in international relationships come from different cultural backgrounds where every person carries a particular way of thinking, behaviours and feelings that were learned during their lifetime (Heffernan and Poole 2005). For this reason, TNE partnerships are complex, and home universities that have plans to expand their programmes in different countries should be aware that the establishment of a partnership with X would not be similar to a partnership with Y. Besides understanding the culture of the host country, it is also important to understand the bureaucracy involved in some countries' higher education regulatory bodies, which can be difficult for foreign universities to navigate if they do not have a good social network. For instance, countries in the Arab world use 'wasta' as an important social networking method that is sometimes essential to accomplish tasks; wasta could be defined as using strong family connections or friends to influence the accomplishment of tasks and goals (Hutchings and Weir 2006). Subsequently, for some countries, the selection of the right partner who has strong knowledge and connections in getting things done could be the most important factor.

Obstacles that may face international partnerships are divers and related to different dimension; Ayoubi and Massoud (2012) explored these that face British universities when establishing TNE partnerships with overseas educational providers. The authors grouped the obstacles into two key groups: the selection of the partner and the actual process of partnership establishment. Multiple studies have discussed the obstacles of international partnerships (Ayoubi and Al-Habaibeh 2006; Kale, Singh, and Perlmutter 2000; Kanter 1994; Wilkins and Huisman 2012), these obstacles include poor communication, imbalance, cultural issues, financial obstacles and each partner prioritising their own respective agendas. Therefore, understanding the individual relationships among TNE partners before engaging in any kind of partnership is important for a successful and enduring partnership. Even though there have been some attempts from previous studies to understand TNE partnership dynamics, they tend to analyse international higher education partnerships as more inter-institutional strategic relationships rather than inter-personal human relationships.

Theoretical framework: social networks

Our theoretical framework is based on the ideas of Putnam's (1995) Social Capital Theory and M. S. Granovetter's (1973) Strength of Weak Ties theory. In his research about social capital, Putnam (1995) defined social capital as 'features of social life, such as trust, norms and networks that enable participants to act together more effectively to pursue shared objectives' (p. 56). Additionally, he argued that social networks have value, although he was not referring to the companionship or the emotional support individuals get from relationships; rather, he was referring to the social connections themselves, which provide us as individuals and as a community with value. In dividing up the value that one can benefit from social networks, Putnam (2000) mentioned four different ways of benefiting: information, reciprocity, collective action and solidarity. First, social networks are a good source of information that can lead to new opportunities and potential partnerships or investments, and without building those connections, one would never hear about such opportunities. Second, another benefit is reciprocity, or mutual aid, where people who have social connections can invest in their relationship and help each other, thus gaining the benefits of mutual aid and trust building. Third, the benefit of powerful collective action of a connected group working together where their impact is much more than any individual action. Finally, solidarity is another benefit of having social connections with other people, and can provide a sense of empowerment for being a member of a certain group or community.

One common concept that both (M. S. Granovetter 1973; Putnam 2000) argued is the role of weak ties or bridging social capital in building social networks with outsiders. In his research, M. S. Granovetter (1973) defined weak ties as social connection relationships that can be characterised by rare interaction and little intimacy, though these connections are wide-ranging, less redundant and offer a better way to bridge with other social networks. In contrast, M. S. Granovetter (1973) describes strong tie relationships as 'a probably linear combination of the amount of time, the emotional intensity, the intimacy (mutual confiding), and the reciprocal services' (1361). Additionally, strong ties represent close friends and family members who can provide higher-quality information and tacit knowledge. Although
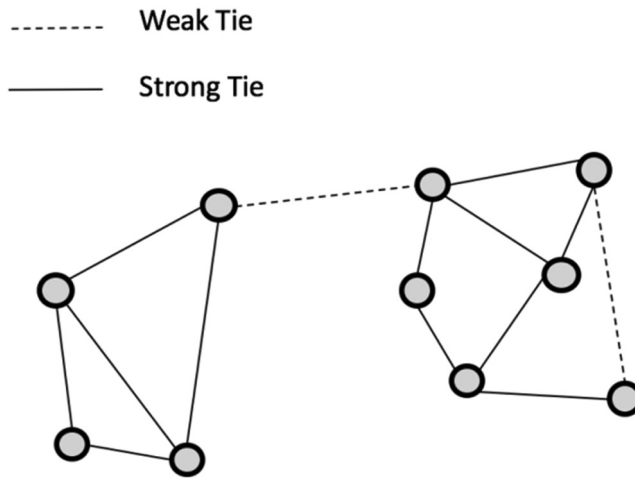
Figure 1. Granovetter's Strength of Weak Ties theory as presented by (Constantino & Nuñez 2019).

strong ties might provide information based on trust, the contribution of the weak ties network allows access to various networks of strong ties, which can result in an increased number of opportunities (M. Granovetter 1985) see Figure 1. These networks would be inaccessible in the absence of weak ties, as most strong tie networks are made up of the same people who have similar characteristics. Therefore, the social connections of distant acquaintances who operate in different network circles would excel in generating broader reciprocity and benefit in gathering unique novel information and innovative opportunities. In other words, as Rangan (2000) describes it, 'The broader an actor's network connections, the more likely the actor will be to identify suitable potential exchange partners' (823).

Lin (1999) sought to bond together (M. S. Granovetter 1973) strength of the weak ties network theory with (Putnam 2000) Social Capital Theory, arguing that social capital is a collective of embedded resources in social networks and that the interactions of individuals in social systems make the maintenance and re-production of this social asset possible. For the purpose of this study, we are interested in bringing both theories together to analyse the role of social capital and social networks by tracing individuals' relationship dynamics in establishing a partnership between two unique organisations in two dissimilar geographic locations.

Another concept that both (M. S. Granovetter 1973; Putnam 2000) handle in unique ways is trust, which refers to social mechanisms by which people interact with each other in situations of uncertainty and risk, based on their mutual expectations, preferences, and values. It affects how people behave, communicate, and cooperate in social networks, as well as how they believe, feel, and act towards each other.

Putnam's viewpoint argues that trust comes from people's shared networks and mutual standards. Conversely, Granovetter dives into how trust assists in spreading information and resources in networks. They focus on different areas; Putnam looks at how trust impacts society and culture overall, whereas Granovetter's angle studies trust's function on a smaller scope like individuals or groups. Putnam's theory is more rule-based, while Granovetter's leans towards explanation.

Putnam's theory corresponds more with civic participation and social resources. In contrast, Granovetter's concept links more with social movement and networking structure.

Trust works as a mechanism to reduce uncertainty and risk in social interactions, especially when there is incomplete or asymmetric information, conflicting interests, or interdependence among the parties involved (Renn and Levine 1991). Alarcon et al (2018), found that trust operates by influencing the expectations, perceptions, and behaviours of the trustor (the one who trusts) and the trustee (the one who is trusted) in a reciprocal and dynamic way. Trust according to Mayer et al. (1995) lets people work together. It allows them to communicate, cooperate and organise effectively in social groups.

There are benefits and incentives provided by trusts for both parties. The trustor finds that trust reduces the cognitive and emotional costs of decision-making, increases their satisfaction and well-being, and facilitates their achievement of goals, both personal and collective (Kramer and Lewicki 2010). For the trustee, it enhances the reputation and credibility of the trustee, increases the loyalty and commitment of the trustor, and creates opportunities for mutual learning and growth (Dirks and Ferrin 2001). According to Lewicki et al (2006) trust functions well when a balance exists between the advantages and disadvantages of trusting and being trusted. This balance occurs when the individual who trusts and the person being trusted have agreement in their anticipations, choices, and principles. It also functions well if the person trusting has a strong enough tendency to trust. This tendency can be shaped by the individual's character, past experiences, cultural background, and situation (Colquitt, Scott, and LePine 2007).

We utilised Putnam's Social Capital Theory to explore the importance of trust, norms, and networks in collective action within organisational networks. In addition, we explored how distant connections, despite their lesser intimacy, allowed vital information exchange between individuals within different organisations using Granovetter's Strength of Weak Ties theory. These theories weren't just theoretical frameworks; they formed the backbone of our methodology, steering our analysis of partnership dynamics across diverse social networks.

Methods

The research was conducted using the qualitative case study approach that involved participants who were part of a TNE partnership establishment between the UK and Qatar. The case study approach was mainly used in this specific research as it helps in examining a phenomenon in a single-bonded case, which in regards to this research is the establishment of a TNE partnership between a Qatari educational institution (A) and a British university (B).

The data collection consisted of six semi-structured interviews with six key informants (Table 1) of those who were involved in the established partnership agreement between A and B. There were five males from the top leadership whose average age was 45–50 years old, and one female from the middle leadership, whose average age was 35–45 years old. Two interviewees were from top management and were involved in the initial discussions; In Qatar, he was the CEO for the local institution. The one In the UK was responsible for international branches and education partnerships of his university. The rest were Involved

Table 1. List of participants from both institutions in Qatar and the UK.

Institution	Acronym	Interviewee Title
Qatar (A)	A 1	Top leadership
Qatar (A)	A 2	Middle leadership
Qatar (A)	A 3	Middle leadership
UK (B)	B 1	Top leadership
UK (B)	B 2	Middle leadership
UK (B)	B 3	Middle leadership

in the discussions, negotiations, writing and doing other technicalities aspects of the partnership.

The semi-structured interviews were mainly used to allow for more flexibility in probing the answers given by each participant and to explore how the partnership was perceived (Yin 2011). To protect their identity, the six participants are arbitrarily named A1, A2 and A3 for interviewees from the Qatar educational institution, and B1, B2 and B3 for participants from the British university, as shown in Table 1. The interviews were all recorded, conducted online via Microsoft Teams, and lasted between 40–60 minutes. Participant selection was based on those who were involved in the establishment of the partnership from the initial discussions to the stage of producing the partnership agreement. Through snowball sampling, the author contacted both A1 and B1, who then recommended particular individuals who were central to the negotiation and establishment stage of the partnership. As the main purpose of this research is to explore the relationship dynamics on partnership creation, it is important to note that we did not interview those who were only part of the implementation of the partnerships on the ground, such as faculty and operational staff. The interviews started with questions aimed at gathering more real-life context about the phenomenon, such as, 'What influences the partnership and how did it start?', 'Tell me more about how it started'? and "who were involved in establishing the partnership?'

Data analysis

All recorded interviews were transcribed into six different word documents and then uploaded to NVivo software. The data gathered were analysed using an inductive thematic analysis approach, as described by Braun and Clarke (2006). The texts were read and re-read to develop familiarisation and to obtain a good sense of the interviewees' experiences with the establishment of the partnership by looking for patterns of meaning related to the research questions. Relevant meanings were coded and grouped into initial thematic groups. This initial thematic group was reviewed several times and reduced by combining similar themes for a better understanding. Consequently, three main themes that represent what the analysis uncovers were generated.

Results

Social network as the core of the partnership

The interviews revealed that the formation of the partnership between A and B began in 2015, when the Qatari educational institute actively conducted research on partnering with a British university to expand their commercial activities by offering university

degrees. The data analysis demonstrates social networks have been the main basis in establishing the partnership between A and B. The initial connection was based on a referral and social relationship acquaintances, as (A1) mentioned, 'to be honest, one of the board members has a unique relationship with (B) university because of his son studying there, he suggested exploring the potential of partnering with (B) university, so then he connected us'. Even though (A) stated, 'through extensive market study were looking for four other universities and B was not one of them' (A2), the social connection that evolved 'between a member of the staff and a student from Qatar that had been studying at (B)' (B2) was the main reason to shape this partnership. This shows how social relationships contribute to bridging two distant partners and providing an innovative opportunity for both.

HEIs that are looking to expand their offerings through international partnerships should focus on building both student experiences and social relationships with students, as it might be a door for a further partnership. B3 stated that 'It's actually about building on the existing relationships . . . we had a connection with one of our students who gave us the opportunity for an introduction to institution A'. The alumni network is also viewed as a good source of influence for keeping the relationship going, as B3 added: 'we kept in touch with our students, and through the relationships we had there, the opportunity for an introduction to A came around'. Social connections seem to be an initial step that allows people to invest in their relationships and build a connection. In our case, without students spending valuable time at B and forming this relationship, partners might never have considered this opportunity, or it would have taken longer to access information and accelerate mutual benefit. It can be conceptualised that international students' networks, such as alumni networks, are a good source to use to create benefits for those who participate in them.

Both partners mentioned an important note related to the historically positive relationships that both countries share across economic and political levels. Additionally, Qataris value the UK as a destination for study. B1 stated, 'Qatar has quite a special relationship with the UK. We know that Qataris like being in the UK and there is a kind of relationship between them'. Also, as A3 mentioned, 'It is an opportunity for us to expand what is offered to students in Qatar . . . they like the UK and it's an opportunity for them to study in Qatar while getting a British degree'. Though this is not directly related to social connection, it might indicate the evolved emotions and the historical political relations that result from students' value regarding their study in the UK. Additionally, the type of ties and reciprocation between individuals or institutions seems to be critical in generating key partnership qualities, such as trust and cooperation.

Trusted friendship

Another theme revealed from the respondents is the deep trust that they build together, which seems to influence the direction of the partnership, and the relationship was extended between the members involved in the establishment of the partnership. The management in B was reluctant in this partnership when they first heard about it. However, as B2 stated, 'I made arguments that kind of established personal relationships with people. It was a really personal relationship between A2 and his family, which I think was a big drive for the argument.' This strengthened both

partners' understanding of what they were aiming for and helped build trust. The initial social connection that was discussed in the first theme resulted in building strong social relationships between other members in both institutions. It seems that social capital stemming from social networks can be characterised by trust and solidarity, which leads to mutually beneficial outcomes.

Trust involved between members has been one of the main pillars that strengthened the relationship and helped establish the partnership. Building trust depends on individuals' interactions and usually comes after starting the relationship. B1 stated, 'It's about people's relationships. If you all didn't trust B2, then we wouldn't trust A2, and it would be hard to maintain this business relationship'. In addition, A3 mentioned that 'developing trust in the relationship is absolutely crucial'. B2 stated, 'Having the chance to meet and observe each other also helped in building trust when we first met. I didn't know anything about the team I met until I observed the ways that they behaved and worked. Then, I felt that I could trust them'. Meeting others who have shared goals allows for interactions and building better connections that lead to mutual benefit. These regular meetings could be formal or informal, which could show the level of individual trustworthiness and commitment in the partnership.

Trusted relationships between individuals involved in the negotiation influence the creation of the partnership. One important note which demonstrates how this partnership was built in trust is the collaboration of writing a joint agreement. B1 stated, 'It's unlike the other contracts we have because usually we insist that other partners to use our contract, and this contract is a hybrid contract with A. We had a good calibre'. Consequently, the social relationship coupled with trust has influenced the establishment positively. Additionally, the trust and strong relationship led to possibilities of expanding the partnership further beyond just delivering a degree programme as planned, which is discussed in the next theme. Finally the data revealed that a successful partnership between institutions was significantly influenced by the mutual trust among the individuals involved.

Shared benefits

The findings demonstrate that shared goals and the mutually beneficial nature of A and B's partnership resulted from the impeded social capital of a strong relationship between involved members. For example, (A) was looking to '[expand] their degree offering in partnering with international universities' (A2), and (B) was looking to 'generating revenue'. The shared goals influenced the establishment of the partnership between A and B which led to building a stronger relationship between members. Accordingly, this strong relationship has discussed further collaboration and benefits for both partners, which evolved during discussions and negotiations. 'The ideal scenario for a partnership would be a mixture of the franchise delivery in the heart of it, but you'd want to be doing other things as well. I think this is a partnership where we have been doing those things because of the good relations' (B3). For example, partners have discussed the opportunity for 'Qatari students enrolled in AB to get the chance to attend one semester at B's home campus, while also giving the chance for students in the UK to come to Qatar' (B3).

The data also reveal that both partners were looking at the early stages for pure economic benefits. For example, the UK partner stated that 'Government funding forced B to look for different forms of income' (B1). In contrast, A was more likely looking to become 'more profitable and needed in the market degrees' (A2). However, with more meetings and the solidification of the relationship, the partners were looking for mutual economic benefits from this partnership through different activities besides tuition fees. B2 mentioned that 'the ground was really very solid . . . we even took it further by trying to establish a way of work where we could mutually access research funds and connect academics together'. It is obvious that the partnership was not only about offering degrees, but it went beyond that, including diverse economic benefits. B3 stated, 'Conversations we've had with A2 around short course delivery, which can mutually benefit both economically'. Both institutions are looking to this partnership as an opportunity to 'look at other sources to diversify income, and transnational education represents a big portion of that' (B2). It seems that the benefit comes from connected groups working together on shared goals, which has a powerful positive impact on the involved members. Consequently, evolved social relationships between members within different groups allow for further benefits, including economic and cultural benefits.

Discussion

This study aims to explore the role of individual relationship dynamics in driving the establishment of a TNE partnership agreement between the UK as a home country and Qatar as a host country. Contrary to most existing research on TNE partnerships that mainly focuses on macro-level institutional actors, this research focuses on the relationships between individuals at the heart of the formation process and the traits that contribute to the establishment of A and B's partnership.

The first theme of this study argues that social networks are the main reason for forming the partnership between A and B. The acquaintance tie between the international student from Qatar and the faculty at (B) allowed for the broadening of the network and provided access to innovative partnerships. This is in-line with (M. S. Granovetter 1973) strength of weak ties theory, as the Qatari international student was acting as a bridge between two networks to foster the relationship between actors in A and B (see Figure 2). Without the student relationship with the faculty and the experience of studying at B, both partners would not extend their network and form this partnership. This illustrates how informal relationships might provide valuable resources and opportunities that might not be available through strong relationships. Additionally, it is evident that international higher education providers can benefit from overseas alumni who experience a positive educational experience, which makes such students reliable allies. Lomer (2017) argues that the UK education policy for international students who then become alumni was dominated by increasing their international presence. In his study of education networks and international trade, Murat (2014) found an increase in trade between the UK and home countries of international students who studied in the UK. Although the alumnus in this study were not in a position to make the decision to partner with B university, a particular alumni influenced his father's decision indirectly (Member of Qatari institution board) who then suggested they connect with B based on his son's connection. This might also represent what we have mentioned in
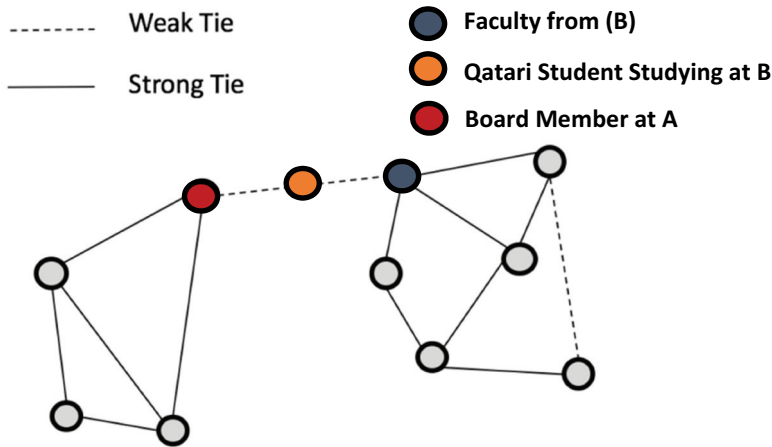
Figure 2. Illustration of social connection bridge between A and B according to (M. S. Granovetter 1973) theory.

the literature as the concept of '*wasta*', where people in the Middle East trust each other by their connection to family or friends, which provides access to get things done (Hutchings and Weir 2006).

   The social connection was also a reason for building a strong social relationship built on trust and mutual benefits between individuals in A and B, and this can be seen from the second and third themes of our data. M. S. Granovetter (1973) described strong ties between involved individuals in a network as being measured by the amount of time, the degree of emotional intensity and shared benefits. This is also in line with Putnam (1995) view of social capital, which can be identified as networks and trust that empower individuals and institutions to achieve shared goals through partnership. In the case of A and B, the initial meetings between members do not suggest that they trusted each other; however, the continuous meetings, discussions and shared goals led to establishing trust between actors. Ma (2018) stated that meeting individuals before establishing any kind of partnership is important towards building trust. Therefore, developing the relationships during the initial discussions with partners is essential in influencing the partnership. Stephen and Carolina (2012) discussed the role of trust in providing an important glue for networks in their work regarding new policy networks. In addition, influence on policy comes from informal conversations between actors and the trust they build. These informal meetings and discussions show that individuals have discussed potentially further projects that were not part of the initial idea. Therefore, social capital embedded in the relationships between individuals is an asset for the whole partnership between A and B, and trust becomes a central component that acts as a lubricant of individuals' interactions (Putnam 2000).

   The final theme that emerged from respondents' accounts was about shared goals and the mutual benefits they built during discussions. It is evident that social relationships between partners can enable access to mutual benefits, including economic benefits. According to Bourdieu and Richardson (1986), the social world and the interactions between people cannot be understood without taking into consideration different factors,

such as economic and cultural factors. Additionally, a key concept to (Putnam 2000) work is the effect of reciprocation, or mutual aid, in encouraging cooperative behaviour and value creation. Individuals have social connections invested in their relationships by helping each other and receiving the benefit of mutual aid and building trust. It is evident from the data that the partnership between A and B leveraged social capital which enabled access to economic benefits for both partners and other shared goals, such as the possibility to access research funds, cross-border teaching and opportunities for student exchange. Tedrow and Mabokela (2007) investigated higher education collaboration between South African universities and international western providers and found that partnerships are impacted by the relationships and mutual benefits that each partner receives. Additionally, they found that setting the objectives of such partnerships is deeply affected by relationships and the mutual benefits that each partner receives from this partnership. Consequently, social capital rooted between individuals' relationships who are involved in the partnership enables them to act together to achieve shared goals through reciprocally beneficial activities.

Interestingly, the Qatari partner also shows interest in getting economic benefit through this partnership. While previous literature (Healey 2013, 2020; Leung and Waters 2013) has heavily discussed economic benefits as a main driver of British universities' international education, previous studies within the last 10 years that explored Qatar's influence on hosting international universities, mainly from the US (Ahmed 2019; Khodr 2011; Mustafa et al. 2018), have not discussed the economic benefit for Qatar from these partnerships. The drivers were mainly on the state level to develop the human capital of its citizens through attracting the best practices that were fully funded by the government (Ahmed 2019; Khodr 2011). According to (Ministry of Education and Higher Education 2020), ' The state encourages the private sector to invest in the higher education sector, as it has put in place a number of special laws motivating this. The number of universities in Qatar reached 29 universities in 2019, compared to 16 universities in 2014'. One of the reasons for this might be due to a drop in oil and gas prices, which are the main sources of income for the country and heavily impact the government's support of expenditure (Eid 2020). However, even though the economic benefits could be considered more of an institutional force on individuals, it is evident that personal social networks, trust and mutual benefits could result in positive outcomes. Therefore, the created social relationship not only benefitted the individuals involved in the establishment, but the whole project of the partnership between A and B.

Conclusion

This study was motivated by the limited research exploring the role of individuals' relationships in the establishment of a TNE partnership between a Qatari educational institute (A) and a British university (B). Despite the substantive research that focused on the motivation of internationalisation at the institutional level in the UK as an exporter and Qatar as importer, very little research has been conducted to explore individuals' dynamics within the establishment of partnerships. The research demonstrates the unique nature of the establishment of A and B from the early stages of how individuals' connections and relationships can foster the partnership further. The findings suggest that higher education partnerships

built through social connections, trust and mutual benefits are strong and more sustainable. The study could offer higher education administrators, policy makers and practitioner's valuable data and insights on the importance of developing social relationships in these kinds of partnerships for better outcomes. Additionally, educational institutions should care more about the kind of experiences they provide their students, as they might open the door for a better opportunity in the future. The research complements the strength of weak ties theory (M. S. Granovetter 1973) and the social capital theory (Putnam 1995) in building international higher education partnerships.

As with most other case study designs, the main limitation of this research is the limited generalisability of our results. However, the case study approach was used mainly to examine a phenomenon in a single-bonded case, which is currently under research. It is important to acknowledge that further research regarding the influence of establishing international partnerships may identify other drivers that were not found in this investigation. Additionally, it is worth evaluating the individual's interactions in this partnership on the ground level, and the characteristics of the individuals affected the trust building.

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