*Curriculum Enhancement through Learning Partnerships*

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**Introduction**

Curriculum enhancement through redesign and innovation have been in focus of HE in the UK recently in order to enable graduates to thrive in ever-changing societies whose economies have become intertwined (Clifford, 2013). This means that universities need to ensure clear progression routes for their students so that they can succeed as global citizens. Furthermore, in the context of higher education internationalization curriculum development has become crucial (Leask, 2015). British Council (2016) highlighted a clear need for recognizing and consulting other HE systems' aims and priorities, and consequently encouraged stronger engagement and multidimensional collaboration, such as mobility of international students and academics, academic programmes, and investing in international research collaborations.

The purpose of this paper is to discuss the case study of curriculum enhancement strategies of Centre for English Language and Communication at Aston (CELCA), in the context of international learning partnerships. It will focus on a model for educational service enhancement through diversification and student engagement in curriculum design (Quality Assurance Agency, 2012) in collaboration with Aston Business School and international partnerships in China.

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**Background**

CELCA is often seen as a small service centre, as it is not an academic unit, although it is part of the School of Languages and Social Sciences (LSS). Due to the Centre's main roles as well as its budget nature, it not only offers English language support to international students and lecturers, but also delivers its own programmes and courses to fee paying students, which means it has the award-giving power. Consequently, it has to attract international students as part of its sustainable development strategy.

In order to meet its current targets and compete with bigger and more established universities worldwide, in particular the ones in the USA, UK and Australia, CELCA staff members need to innovate and collaborate multidirectionally within the university and with its current partners. This paper will discuss its latest developments in the International Year Abroad Programme (IYA) supported by Aston Business School in particular.

In other words, in order to establish its unique position within the University, as an academic-related centre with a relatively independent budget, CELCA needs to address the issue of sustainable relations with its international partners.

The impetus for redesigning the IYA curriculum originated from its partner universities in China that requested access to several Aston Business School modules through this programme, which currently awards students with a Certificate of Higher Education. The aim was to design a more challenging programme so as to accommodate the needs of both average and very talented international students and support them in accomplishing multiple, individually-tailored academic goals.

Therefore, there was an opportunity for a social innovation, which can be assessed against the following criteria:

- quality of the solutions to the identified educational issues (in this case more talented students' needs),

- quality of new capabilities and developed relationships (new level of partners' involvement in the curriculum design),

- better use of assets and resources (ABS and CELCA getting more students on the existing modules),

- new or improved services (richer services to international students), processes (sustainable process of recruitment, delivery and quality enhancement), and

- the model of ensuring social cohesion (In this case, more talented partner university students get a more challenging programme, even though they have the same core module - IELTS tailored to suit individual students' needs).

According to the EU Europe 2020 Strategy - Horizon 2020, social innovation is one of six key themes for HE development.The main research opportunities identified in relation to social innovation are in managing diversity, overcoming health inequalities, supporting rural areas and societies, financial sector and private sector (European Commission, 2016). This also encompases one of the key UN values: "*Strive to deliver a fairer and more inclusive society*" (The United Nations, 2009). Thus, the key question educational service providers need to reflect on is how they can develop not only themselves, but all the clients and other interested parties, and how they can do it well.

As far as CELCA is concerned, the partners' idea about greater inclusion and enhanced provision for more talented students was not developed enough due to different internal and external challenges which created constraints for collaboration and led to somewhat unbalanced relationships. The fluctuating student numbers in 2013 and 2014 clearly showed that a change was needed urgently. Finger and Brand (1999: 136) recognized 'learning organization' as a vision towards which organisations need to aspire so as to be ready to address various challenges and demands. Learning organisations recognize that both self-directed, individual as well as strategic, corporate learning are key.

Although the need for learning through communication with partner universities was recognized earlier, it was affected by the external economic and political factors, such as the UK Boarder Agency's stricter requirements for international students' visas in general. Furthermore, from students' perspective, the UK was not the first choice for studying because of the soaring fees and other costs. Nevertheless, it became more obvious that the IYA programme itself, being seen as a language and culture development route to postgraduate studies, did not meet all the needs of more talented students requiring a more specific path for their academic development. Therefore, a more comprehensive approach was adopted and negotiations within the University, in particular with ABS were reinitiated. According to the model of 'frugal innovation' (Radjou and Prabhu, 2015), both the front and the back ends of innovation must progress in the same direction in coordination, like a convoy, if their aim is to prosper and avoid breaking apart.

Compared to other similar centres, CELCA has not yet undergone any major structural changes and is still investigating its best position within the university. In addition, there is a lot of tasks for the University to accomplish on its way towards a learning organization. Regarding academic language and communication services at other UK universities, three major categories can easily be established: A) International Academies within the universities; B) partnerships with external contractors; C) small English for academic purposes and communication centres.

**A) International Academies**

Some university English for academic purposes and communication centres have grown into academies, following the major university structural changes, such as The Birmingham International Academy (BIA), which provides the University's

Foundation Pathways, Presessional English programmes for students preparing to study at the University, Pre-Doctoral programmes, and Pre-Masters programmes, in addition to English support for students who are already at the University. The Wolverhampton University International Academy is another example of similar development. It has different preparing-for-study strands (English Pre-sessional Programme, EFL courses, short and summer courses, as well as pre-masters courses, pre-research course / Graduate and Professional English Language Skills Course and International Foundation Year), training courses for practicing English teachers, International Business Communication and modern and community languages.

In the above mentioned cases, the centres have diversified their services and possibly merged with some other centres (e.g. modern and community languages) in order to cut the administrative costs and offer the same services to different types of international students at the same time, cutting the cost by recycling the materials and offering more blended learning opportunities as well. This is a cost effective movement that is usually part of a university plan and it mainly happens across the organisation within the same set period of time. It is very likely that Aston University will aspire for the same model, following the establishment of individual School International Foundation programmes. At the moment, it is clear that CELCA is contributing to the existing Foundation curricula, but it does not own the programmes. In addition, it is just one of its services and without the green light for the growth in permanent staff numbers, it does not have capacity to take too many different modules and programmes.

**B) Partnerships with external contractors**

On the other hand, some universities use external services, such as INTO (International Transformation), an international educational organisation which develops long-lasting partnerships with HE institutions worldwide to support their students and help the universities achieve their internationalisation ambitions. INTO University of East Anglia was the first partnership which started in 2006 in Brighton and opened the UK's first dedicated, on-campus living and learning centre for international students in 2008. This partnership model provides not only services but "investment and access to resources beyond the scope and capacity of individual universities" (INTO, 2016). Kaplan International Colleges (KIC) (2016) works in partnership with leading universities to prepare international students for studying a bachelor's, master's or doctorate degree in the UK. Their preparation courses equip students with the academic skills, key subject knowledge and English language ability needed to progress to university. They are delivered on campus, but also online. In the first case they are taught at specialised international colleges, run in partnership with the following universities: University of York, University of Aberdeen, University of Brighton, Nottingham Trent University, UWE Bristol, University of Glasgow, University of Liverpool, Bournemouth University, University of Westminster; the University of Nottingham. It is obvious that these universities have taken a different approach to Aston University, where Aston Schools are developing their independent International Foundation Programmes which pay for

CELCA teaching services, but also have free individual English language tutorials and school-specific academic language workshops.

## C) Language and communication centres

These centres most often exist within smaller universities, such as Aston University, or Worcester University. They may combine modern languages, English for International students, IELTS preparation courses, CELTA (Certificate in English Language Teaching and Assessment), English for academic purposes, general English classes, Teaching English as a Foreign Language courses and similar. Such centres boast of friendlier atmosphere and closer tutor-student relationships, due to the student numbers and a dedicated and easily recognizable teaching and learning areas, which may not be the case on larger campuses. Although that may be the case, the increasing concentration of students and lecturers in larger universities presents both opportunities and challenges. On the one hand, cooperation with other departments is more feasible and students' adaptation to academic life is more natural due to exposure to more opportunities, such as optional free lectures, various activities and services. There are also more opportunities for work and volunteering. Similarly, Johnson, (2010) referring to Geoffrey West's power laws compares big to small centres and finds that despite all the  distraction caused by crowds and noises, the average person functioning in a big centre can be up to three times more creative compared to the one operating in a small centre. Large number of opportunities and exposure to information have agreat impact on individual's and teams' creative capabilities.

We live in an age of accelerated lives where new patterns emerge  every day and the intervals between them keep shortening, which makes us experience new products and service patterns, but also become increasingly more willing to embrace them. The frequencies of exposure to various experiences are ever-increasing and, although at the beginning it may take longer to adopt certain new habits, products or services, people become more trained surfers. This means that students as service users tend to demand or search for the latest trends. Johnson (2010) calls this 10/10 rule; it takes a decade to build a new platform and another decade for it to find a mass audience. For small centres, the audience is already available, but with the university's raising capacity, the need for a change is just around the corner.

CELCA's innovative engagement aims to create opportunities for collaborative work in terms of learning organization with ABS and international partners through: a) programme diversification, b) research in student engagement and c) participation in curriculum design and development. These activities have also sparked collaboration with other services, such as Disability Support Services, so as to enhance learning and teaching practices through inclusion and differentiation models.

In order to establish its unique position within the University, as an academic-related centre with an independent budget, CELCA needs to address the issue of sustainable relations with its international partners.

**Foreign Universities' Provision**

Regarding the foreign universities, out of the four main English-speaking higher education markets (Canada, United States, Australia and the United Kingdom), post-study immigration is accessible in Canada and Australia at the moment. Therefore, an increasing number of students in these two countries in 2016 is likely due to the fact that education has become a gateway to post-study living, as students know they can look for work there after the completion of the studies (Graney, 2016; British Council, 2016). Although Canada and Australia have very strong academic reputation, as well as open, multicultural societies, the above mentioned opportunities irresistibly attract international students.

**Literature Review**

According to Llopis (2017) the majority of innovative solutions have been results of networking and some forms of partnership, as innovation does not depend on leadership, but can originate from employees who analyse the services offered and know the needs of the company's customers and partners. Competition analysis and the insight into the latest trends in the industry, including brands and the use of technology are therefore crucial. Nevertheless, innovation and development most often originate from multiple internal and external sources, because individual experts cannot come up with the same ideas as groups of people with different experiences and visions, which means that sharing existing and creating new opportunities is necessary.

In CELCA's case, the external sources were partner universities, whereas the internal sources were the Centre's staff and Aston Business School leadership. It was interesting to see that the reiteration of the partners' ideas in waves, through time, made some impact on the partnership development - Elliot's Wave Principle (Prtechter and Frost, 2005). Learning from the previous experiences and listening to the partners' guidelines have rekindled the discussion on the IYA students' access to ABS undergraduate modules and improved the communication channels. Consequently, the new ideas evolved out of continuous negotiation. However, although idea creation does not depend on leadership, innovative ideas still have to be fully supported by leaders; the ideas need to be followed through, and leadership and management need to control the raising financial issues, such as sources and profitability. This means that leaders do need to encourage innovation through collaborative work of teams with different points of view (top-bottom approach). Also, researchers and employees need to be in communication with the leadership to ensure a bottom-up approach as well.

In the latest IYA development strategy, sustainable growth relies on diversification, remodeling for the best fit, addressing the performance gaps and details that potentially create tension, taking ownership and initiating communication that seeks for new opportunities, avoiding complacency and making informed decisions. This coincides to a great degree with the ABS undergraduate and postgraduate programmes strategies, which has allowed initiation of quality enhancement through

collaborative work. Nevertheless, this implies further work on understanding the partner universities' goals and potential students' aspirations, as well as developing true collaboration with them. Some joint research, projects and publications, exchange of staff members, student engagement in curriculum design and service diversification are the basis to maintain constructive negotiations to establish the best fit.

**Alliances**

Successful cooperative international alliances provide evidence that there are benefits in developing a wider range of solutions in particular to technical problems. Innovative capability through cross-border alliances thus may be one of the most important means for firms to enhance inter-firm partnering in the new age of alliance capitalism (Carlsson, 2006). Nevertheless, depending on the range of collaborations, developing alliances may also have negative effects (Parida et al, 2012) as partnerships outside the value chain can lead to high costs and situations with 'free-riding' unknown partners (Bessant, Kaplinsky, and Lamming, 2003).

In harsh reality numerous partnerships have failed despite their good intentions (Faems, VanLooy, and Debackere, 2005; Sadowski and Duysters, 2008). Some of the reasons are differences in understanding the concepts, opposite interests, irreconcilable differences in time management of resource allocation (Mahnke and Overby, 2008), work ethics, complex risk management in uncertain conditions (Park and Ungson, 2001). Therefore, alliances are not the ideal model of collaboration, as their outcome in the globalised context is not always certain (Pittaway, Robertson, Munir, Denyer, and Neely, 2004), although using inflows and outflows of knowledge is likely to encourage open internal innovation and expand the markets for external use of innovation (Chesbrough et al., 2006).

In the UK HE, like in the USA and Australia, there are various models of transnational education (TNE), as represented in the table overleaf (adapted from WENR, 2012; Knight, 2007).

Table 1. Transnational education models. Adapted from WENR (2012) and Knight (2007).

**Intensity of resources required for the UK institution** (HIGH → LOW, left axis)

| TNE Model | Definition* | Who awards the degree? | Where does the teaching take place? | Who teaches? |
|---|---|---|---|---|
| Branch Campus | UK university establishes a satellite campus in another country or region that is in a different geographic area from the original one. | Branch campus | Branch campus | Branch campus faculty |
| Franchise Arrangement (often called "other instructional side" or "off-site location") | UK university authorises partner institution to offer the approved programme of study (as a whole or in part). | UK institution | Partner institution | Partner institution's faculty, who are usually subject to joint approval by both institutions. Sometimes UK faculty flies out to the partner institution to teach courses. UK university is responsible for monitoring. |
| Joint Degree Program | UK university partners with an existing local institution to provide one collaborative program with periods of study at each location. One degree is awarded bearing often two or more institutions' name, seal, & signature. | UK and partner institutions award one degree | Partner institution, then the home university | Partner and UK university's faculty |
| Double/Dual Degree Program | UK university partners with an existing local institution to provide one collaborative program with periods of study at each location. Each institution awards separate program completion credentials bearing only its name, seal, & signature. | UK and partner institutions award two separate degrees | Partner institution, then the home university | Partner and UK university's faculty |
| Twinning Program | UK university collaborates with an existing local institution to develop an articulation system that allows students to take course credits at a local institution and/or home institution. This allows the students to transfer credits for advanced standing. | UK university | Partner institution, then the home university | Partner and UK university's faculty |
| Distance Delivery | Delivery of courses through independent learning materials or via distance technology (online) directly with the student or through partnering with a local institution. | UK university | Partner institution or worldwide | UK university's faculty |

Adapted from WENR. (Aug,2012) and Knight (2007).

The transnational models are examples of learning partnerships in which institutions, mainly universities from different countries either adopt, to some extent learning methods of another institution, or they jointly design new systems and mechanisms, again usually similar to the existing ones.

## Cooperation

The benefits of focused, and consistently result-orientated cooperation (Lu and Beamish, 2001) are among others, lower costs, shared market and risk, as well as a broader access to resources (Gulati, Nohria, and Zaheer, 2000). Access to the partner's resources such as capital, equipment, 'network resources' (Gulati, 1998), or other knowledge are the main benefits of alliances, which are necessitated through the need to use the shared sources more frequently.

Nevertheless, finding reliable and stable partners is not easy and it is even more challenging to maintain and develop partnerships.

## Networks

Love et al. (2014) indicated that for entering and succeeding in international markets managers need to develop specific managerial skills on which a company's capability

and motivation to internationalise depend. In the first stage of export-import activities, experience in management and commerce is important, but in the processes of internationalisation more Commercial and managerial experience, for example, may assist but as internationalization becomes more refined managerial education will contribute to better outcomes (Ganotakis and Love 2012). The more extensive networks will increase the likelihood of obtaining knowledge databases and technology developed outside the company (Leiponen and Helfat, 2010).

Innovation partnerships (Roper et al 2014) may also allow organisations to access technology developed elsewhere (Niosi, 1999). Moreover, having more extensive networks of partners is likely to increase the probability of obtaining useful knowledge from outside of the firm (Roper et al. 2008). In addition, partnerships may reduce the risks related to any innovation and lead to lower costs due to sharing (Roper and Xia, 2014). According to Veugelers and Cassiman (1999), innovation is increasingly associated with networks of collaboration and information exchange at relational and structural levels.

Nevertheless, Freeman (1995) insists that despite innovative activities within the context of internationalisation, innovation at the national and regional levels are crucial as they provide the necessary initial networks of relationships. For instance, the national education system, technical and academic institutions, policies brought by local governments, national institutions and various local traditions and standards are essential for innovation as they contribute to the uniqueness of the socially constructed systems adopted by organisations through time. In reality, it is very likely that despite cooperation the particular local character of innovation systems will remain unaffected (Carlosson, 2006**).**

**Resource Constraints**

Resource constraints and resource commitment have been identified as key characteristics of small organisations, in particular during the periods of environmental insexcurity (Erramilli and D'Souza,1993)

Using knowledge and technological advancement obtained from external sources through cooperation (Durst & Edvardsson, 2012), is key for organisations' competitiveness in particular when they have fewer resources. Therefore, it is crucial for them to adopt explorative behaviour, for instance through explorative case studies. They are based on the interviews and aim to explore features of consumer behaviour and business planning related to a particular area of interest. Such companies often lack managerial approaches which contributes to the limited growth. According to Zucchella and Siano (2014) their best solutions are international networking and innovation. Coviello and Munro (1997) claim that it is essential for them to get a deeper insight into the relationship between innovation and international collaboration, which may enable organisations to enhancement of the management strategies and increase the international growth. Also it is beneficial for smaller organisations to participate in marketing and research alliances depending on the sets of tangible and intangible unique resources and capabilities they possess.

**Social Network Theory**

Social network theory is the study of how different forms of participation within networks may lead to different outcomes (Sullivan and Ford, 2013). It highlights the importance of the business person's contacts in getting access to information and resources in order to assist the successful development of an organization. It is closely related to organization competitiveness and it encourages information sharing, resource exchange, and knowledge transfer (Florin et al. 2003; Hite 2005), which all lead to better financial outcomes. Stam et al. (2014) argue that social capital is essential to success and that personality traits need to be given more attention as they are the key factors in social capital.

According to Granovetter (1973) "strength of ties" predict the effectiveness of networking. These factors describe the intensity and diversity of relationships. For instance, acquaintances have weak ,ties and are less socially involved than friends with strong ties. As for the density, a network with numerous weak ties is a low-density network as it lacks many relational lines. However, weaker ties may open opportunities to access information from a broader perspective, whereas closed and localized relationships are fragmented and less coherent, limiting the resources outside the narrow network and resulting in slow diffusion of innovation and new initiatives (Granovetter, 1973). Therefore, bridging weak ties and enrichment of resources can be achieved through connecting different individuals and groups who can provide balanced skills. This competence in balancing weak and strong ties is one of the key characteristics of successful business people. It is worth mentioning that it is not crucial to have all the necessary skills or the resources in order to seize an opportunity (Garnsey 1998) and at the beginning new entrants to markets often rely on close friends' favours. However, in the later stage of networking they aim to shift towards weak ties (Bruederl and Preisendorfer, 1998), and  further down the line, they form ties with seemingly disconnected people and selflessly support others in exploiting business opportunities (Blau, 1977). It has been identified (Shane et al. 2003) that a business person's social capital and networking have a direct relationship with sourcing and access to information, unattainable resources and funding.

**Methodology**

This paper applies exploratory research methods, which is a useful investigation into a situation aiming to provide more insights to the researcher, in particular where a small amount of information exists. It used various methods such as, semi-structured interviews with students, university leaders and academics, as well as administrative staff, group discussions, mini trial studies so as to gain more information (Business Dictionary, 2016)

The research has also applied the *Grounded Theory* approach (Glaser & Strauss, 2012), to generate a solution model through own data observation and action research in the 'community of practice' (Lave & Wenger, 2002). It demonstrates how the International Year Abroad Programme is being developed in collaboration with Aston Business School and partner universities in China.

A grounded theory approach is based on the seminal work of Glaser and Strauss (1967), which focused on systematic data collection and analysis rather than on proving an existing theory. Therefore, it is an inductive approach. Furthermore, this study is even more closely aligned to the so-called Conceptual Model which is not establishing hypotheses or relationships, but identifying a starting point and defining the area of future study. This iterative process generates concepts instead of establishing new theories. (Bryman 2008).

Data collection and analysis used in this qualitative research began with an intention to analyse the area of interest through previous records and reports about the IYA Programme, partner universities and students ideas which still remained only on paper due to different reasons. A hypothesis was generated based on the patterns that emerged and revisited in interviews and group discussions with the latest cohort of the IYA students, visiting researchers and academics and leadership during the business visits to partner universities in China in 2016. The data collected

showed a clear pattern to be followed. In this inductive approach the results collected from different sources were compared and one of the key principles of grounded theory was applied: building change through a flexible, yet repetitive process which guides the researcher towards exploring the possible avenues to gaining a comprehensive understanding of the situation (Corbin and Strauss, 1990). The analysis is based on constant comparisons of data and feedback from different respondents in order to identify key similarities and differences, which will be used in modelling the bespoke solutions so as to satisfy the customers' needs and provide the most appropriate service.

It is important to mention that the research did not use the customers only to provide the information, but the study aimed to actively engage the customers (partner universities and international students) at the front end of the innovative solution in order to increase their loyalty and reduce the product cycle times and waste. In other words, it aimed to improve the depth and breadth of customer engagement as conclusions and decisions made at this stage can make a considerable impact on the cost and speed of developing and marketing new services.

Another important characteristic of the research approach was to examine the different stages of progress and prioritize the regular patterns, taking into account variations which assist in establishing new avenues for investigation. These avenues have eventually led to the programme diversification. Therefore, the solutions and concepts were generated and revisited during the research process until they proved to be acceptable as a result of continuous consultations with the partner universities' leadership and students. These also opened up opportunities to examine the broader social and organisational contexts (for instance, comparison of student engagement in decision making related to programme design and development)

**Results**

**Diversification of the IYA Programme**

This section will provide the information about the new services that emerged as a result of the research and active involvement of the partner universities' leaders and academics as external collaborative party and Aston Business School as an internal partner to the Centre for English Language and Communication at Aston. Out of the original IYA Programme, the following modified and new programmes and courses have evolved: IYA Engage, IYA Explorer and in the planning stages are IYA Advantage and IYA Bridge. The design of the programmes and courses has also been informed by QAA Subject Benchmark Statement for Languages, Cultures and Societies, and by the Common European Framework of Reference for Languages (CEFR). There is another broader modified programme in view which will seek to support students from rural regions whose IELTS level is overall 5.0 (with maximum one skill 4.5) and for which the researcher has been enquiring for a grant.

## 'IYA ENGAGE'
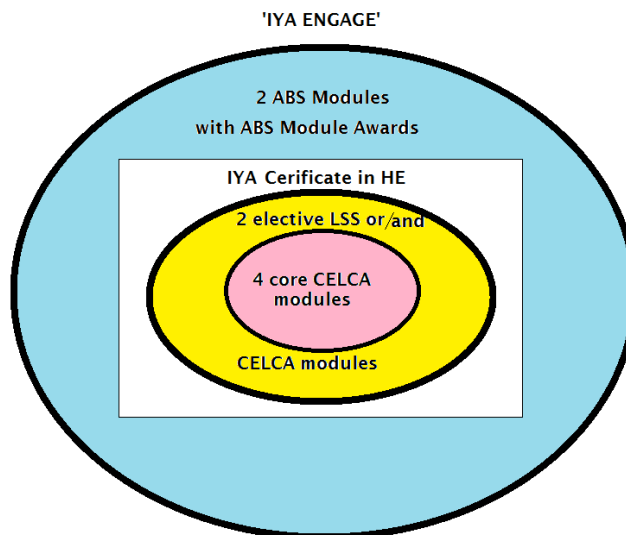


IYA Engage is a combination of the IYA Programme and two, bonus ABS modules for which successful students get special ABS Module Awards. These modules are only for students with IELTS 6.5 (minimum 6.0 in any assessed language skill). In case students find these bonus modules too challenging, they can withdraw with no consequences. The IYA programme must be followed at all times and students taking the free bonus ABS modules will be closely monitored and supported by CELCA.

## 'IYA EXPLORER'

IYA Explorer is a module designed for students who consider joining Aston University or any other university in the UK and would like to experience both general and academic life in the UK for 4 weeks.

The programme comprises two modules: Academic IELTS and Life in the UK. The programme is run in coordination with other Aston School Summer Programmes and Pre-sessional academic programmes, so that students have access to them as part of Life in the UK module, in particular related to the topics about education, business and politics.

As elaborated in the Literature Review section, the concept of learning organisations has an action dimension, whose aim is to identify, evaluate and further promote sustainable and valid learning processes within and between organizations (Easterby-Smith and Araujo, 1999). Nevertheless, in the globalized world it is not enough to have 'introvert' educational institutions that are not alert to the third parties' needs, and original systems of values. Educational programmes should not be treated as products for sale, nor should the internationals students be viewed as customers whose voices are not heard because they are so far or it is too late to discuss with them the major decisions when they arrive. Educational institutions, as practice has shown, need to learn from each other and develop new, exciting programmes that will suit both students' and faculty needs at least.  In HE international learning partnerships, however, curriculum enhancement is just one of the opportunities for cooperation. Much more can be done in the area of collaboration, such as joint research and scholarship, student engagement in decision making mechanisms, free staff and student exchange, joint conference organisation and similar.

On the other hand, although learning partnerships allow the partners to look beyond their individual  settings, principles and frameworks, and to recognize the impact of their practices upon others, too often there are building blocks within the systems. One of them is the fact that ever increasingly complex systems and situations are sometimes addressed with narrow frameworks.

In other cases, the internal systems are affected by external regulations, such as changes in the visa system.

Therefore, Senge et al. (2000) propose that it is necessary to move the focus from the individual parts and understand the whole instead, appreciating learning partnerships as evolving dynamic processes. In this context, appreciation of individual systems, in this case a UK university system as well as a foreign partner university regulations and needs, will lead to the overall partnership system thinking; it is much more promising than focusing on the fragmented interests. In this respect, one of the most significant factors, according to Senge at el. (2000) is feedback mechanism of learning organisations and partnerships as part of the free information flow.
Similarly, Finger and Brand (1999) highlighted the importance of the link with the organizational strategic objectives, claiming that individual and collective learning may not bring long-term benefits to the partners if they are not strongly linked to the strategic  objectives. For this purpose, there needs to be some form of measurement which will determine the extent to which learning partnerships support and promote organisational strategic objectives.

Cohen and Prusak (2001) argue that it is social capital that encourages people to work in increasingly larger groups. These authors define social capital as active human networks that are ideally based on commitment, shared trust and values, as well as binding behaviours within the communities of practice. Some of the main benefits of such partnerships are support, access to resources, in particular the intangible ones, such as talent and information. Therefore, social capital deserves the consistent necessary support, in particular in terms of the following two aspects: allocation of time and space for partnership development and effective communication of aims; equal opportunities and rewards that encourage genuine participation, not mere presence (Cohen and Prusak, 2001).

**Conclusion**

This study proved that collaboration is one of the keys to innovative practices, such as curriculum enhancement in HE. Implementation of its solutions brought clear measurable value: greater value for customers, shareholders and indirectly to the society; fewer and cheaper resources due to sharing of capital, time and technology. It also proved that a business needs to operate in harmony with the system that maintains it alive in the first place, and cannot stand on its side-lines.

As far as CELCA and ABS are concerned, the newly developed programmes and courses have multiple benefits: they are flexible, income-generating, cost effective, credit bearing and have potential to increase the number of module users and bolt on to additional experiences. They raise the Schools' profiles and increase inter-School collaboration. To successful students some of them offer direct entry onto ABS Master's programmes and more varied learning opportunities. They have potential to further the collaboration with the partner universities, particularly in research, staff exchanges and development of double degree programmes.

It is essential for organisations to identify their intellectual capital (knowledge with potential value, such as innovative ideas related to services, products, processes and customers), and skillfully manage its transition into intellectual assets (knowledge that provides value).

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