TOWARDS AN EVALUATION FRAMEWORK FOR INTERNATIONAL STRATEGIC PARTNERSHIPS BETWEEN UNIVERSITIES
A CO-CREATIVE APPROACH

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ABSTRACT

Formalised international strategic partnerships between universities are relatively new. Such agreements include both research and education and cover a range of departments across the partner universities. As these partnerships are expected to contribute to strategic goals and have great impact, the question of evaluation becomes prominent.

This paper presents a project dedicated to the development of a framework for the evaluation of international strategic partnerships. The project was a collaboration between international officers of six universities (of which five in Europe) and academics of two of these universities. It was decided to co-create a framework. The academics guided the international officers through an evaluation of a strategic partnership and developed and tested the framework on the go.

The result is an evaluation framework that is very different from what the international officers initially envisaged. Yet it has changed the way in which evaluation thinking is integrated in the practice of international partnerships in these universities.

Keywords: Strategic partnership, internationalisation, research collaboration, evaluation, co-creation, transdisciplinarity

1. INTRODUCTION

University researchers collaborate across borders and continents. Students go on exchanges and study abroad. A more recent development in the internationalisation of universities is the establishment of formalised international strategic partnerships between institutions. These formal agreements include both research and education and they cover a range of departments. As these partnerships are expected to contribute to strategic goals of universities and have great impact, the question of management and evaluation becomes prominent.

International officers of six universities[1] observed a growth in these strategic partnerships, and a lack of consistent and aligned evaluation practices. They aimed to develop a framework for the evaluation of international strategic partnerships. The framework needed to be useful during all phases of a partnership, in any institutional setting and for a variety of partnerships. Moreover, the framework had to be based on existing literature. Also, the framework needed to be aligned with the evaluation practices in their respective universities. In the end, the framework had to contribute to the quality and sustainability of the partnerships. They initiated the EVALUATE project.

After the start of the project, the internationalisation officers extended the core project-group by including researchers with expertise in collaboration, internationalisation and evaluation. The development of the EVALUATE framework (EVALUATE project, 2022) thus became a transdisciplinary project, in which researchers and practitioners collaborated. The core question of the project and this paper was "how to develop a framework for the evaluation of international university partnerships, that is useful for the daily practice of internationalisation officers and that is based on the state-of-the-art literature". The researchers proposed a co-creative approach to make sure that the framework was embedded in both theory and practice.

The project went through several phases. From orientation, through extension & design of the process, to design & development of the framework. The dissemination phase started after the formal conclusion of the project. The remainder of the paper describes all these phases except the dissemination phase.

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1   Coordinator University of Edinburgh plus strategic partners University of Sydney, University of Copenhagen, University of Helsinki, University College Dublin, and Leiden University.

It should be noted that the project took place during the Covid19 pandemic, i.e. 2020-2022. All but two meetings took place online. The second and final in person meeting took place in October 2022, after which the dissemination phase started.

2. ORIENTATION

During the first phase of the project the international officers focused on the definition of international strategic partnerships. They could not find a straightforward definition in the literature. Moreover, they identified a broad range of activities that they themselves covered in these partnerships. They therefore developed their own working definition:

"A strategic partnership is a formal relationship between two or more universities. It is centrally supported and takes the form of a top-down engagement that depends on a bottom-up approach. A strategic partnership is university-wide, covers a range of departments and includes both research and education. A strategic partnership often demands a high level of engagement from the involved parties and can deliver greater impact than the sum of the individual parts" (EVALUATE project, 2022, p. 7).

The project team learned that there were few relevant studies on the topic of international strategic partnerships. They reached out to researchers working at their universities and asked for support in the development of the framework.[2]

3. EXTENSION & DESIGN OF THE PROCESS

After they joined the project, the researchers focused on three aspects: (1) a substantial literature review; (2) the daily practice and the core issues of international strategic partnerships; and (3) the design of the process that would lead to an evaluation framework.

From the literature review (EVALUATE 2022, 112-170) they learned there is ample literature on internationalisation, mobility, and environmental impacts of international collaboration. Yet it is not straightforward to find literature

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2   Science Technology and Innovation Studies (STIS) at University of Edinburgh and Centre for Science and Technology Studies (CWTS) at Leiden University.

immediately relevant for international strategic partnerships between universities, nor for the evaluation of such agreements. Moreover, the term of strategic partnership has different meanings. Plus, these partnerships are treated differently in each of the participating universities.

Consequently, the notion of international strategic partnerships was unpacked, to understand the different forms and formats it can take. This approach delivered keywords for a broader literature review, which put forward various, separate bodies of literature that are all relevant to international partnerships. The literature review provided the evidence base to develop the framework. However, it also became clear that there is no precedent for the evaluation of strategic partnerships.

Next to the literature review, the researchers acquainted themselves with the practice of working with international strategic partnerships. They participated in the online meetings of the project groups and identified a number of aspects to take into account. Despite the definition developed in the first phase, the international officers did not use "strategic" and "partnership" in a consistent way. Partnerships could include non-academic partners, a limited number of departments only, or would not have a direct link with the university strategy. Moreover, some of the international offices are responsible for dozens, if not hundreds, of agreements and memorandums of understanding. As a consequence, the management of most of these partnerships was light. And finally, even though the international offices were responsible for the evaluation of the partnerships, most of them had little experience and capacity.

The researchers proposed to develop a framework from scratch. They chose a co-creative approach to make sure that the framework was embedded in both theory and practice. They opted to develop a flexible framework, that could be used for different evaluation phases, questions and partnerships. They aimed to deliver a framework that was easy to use, given the limited capacity and experience. They also suggested that the framework would include a number of questions and options. This deviated from the initial desire for an evaluation framework or device that would lead to a clear evaluation result, without too much effort. One of the researchers had developed a similar framework before (Isabelle van Elzakker & Leonie van Drooge, 2019) and this helped convince the international officers to proceed.

The proposed approach was as follows. Each international office (six in total) was asked to do an evaluation of a strategic partnership. The researchers would guide the staff through the evaluation while simultaneously and iteratively developing the evaluation framework. They would adjust it based on

the feedback and responses of the international office staff. More specifically, there would be four online sessions which each international office, one online plenary workshop with presentations and one live workshop with reflections.

4.　DESIGN & DEVELOPMENT OF THE FRAMEWORK

Each international office chose one partnership to evaluate. Five of the six evaluations are included in the handbook (EVALUATE project, 2022, p. 46-111):

1. the evaluation of a first international partnership of the university, in order to learn for future partnerships;

2. the evaluation of the value of an international partnership with academic as well as non-academic partners;

3. the midterm enhancement-led evaluation of a small partnership, in which both universities participated;

4. the evaluation of a partnership with one university, with the focus on the value of the alignment of teaching and research;

5. the evaluation of a partnership with one university, with the focus on the commitment and participation of internal stakeholders, within the university.

These examples illustrate how the case studies extend the definition of strategic partnerships. Example 2 included non-academic partners, example 3 consisted of a very small partnership of two research departments per university only and from example 4 it became clear that international strategic partnerships sometimes only focus on education or research, instead of both.

The researchers developed an agenda for the development of the framework and the support of the evaluation, divided over four meetings:

1. Everything about the strategic partnership. Result: Context + evaluation question + evaluation form

2. Data collection. Result: information

3. Analysis of data. Result: evidence

4. Interpretation of evidence, reflection, conclusion.
   Result: Assessment (+case report).

Each of the meetings was online, including representatives of the research team and of the specific case study team. During the meetings, the researchers learnt that the topic of the first meeting, "everything about the strategic partnership" remained on the table throughout the evaluation, including the history of the partnership, the content of the agreement, the overall goals, the specific targets, the implementation plan, the inclusion of stakeholders (especially in the own organisation), and results. Moreover, they learned that basic information about evaluation methods was required. International office staff was keen to use bibliometric tools but were unfamiliar with recent developments. Plus, international office staff wanted to do interviews and surveys, yet they were not used to design and conduct those.

In addition, the researchers learned from the meetings that the use of a script or a series of questions would be useful. This was confirmed at the first in person meeting of the project. Several of the international officers mentioned that evaluation "is about asking the right questions." They also decided to remain using the word "evaluate" (which is also the name of the project). Using the word helped to stress that the efforts should be systematic and dedicated to judge merit, worth or significance by combining evidence and values (Better Evaluation, n.d.).

The final framework had a different order than the initial agenda set for the meetings. The framework consisted of a series of questions, grouped per topic. The two basic questions underlying the evaluation are:
   1. What is the partnership about?
   2. What is the evaluation about?

The framework consists of four categories of questions and suggestions
   1. The evaluation and its context (figure 1)
   2. The central evaluation question (figure 2)
   3. The partnership and its context (figure 3)
   4. Methods

1. THE EVALUATION AND ITS CONTEXT

Questions to consider when planning an evaluation

- Why evaluate now?
- Who asks for the evaluation?
- Who is involved and in what role?
- What is at stake? What are the consequences?
- What will the follow up look like? What will happen with the results of the evaluation?

Questions that address the more technical aspects of the evaluation

- **When should the evaluation take place?**
  - Prior to formalizing the partnership
  - During the partnership
  - Towards the end of an agreement term

- **What is the goal of the evaluation?**
  - To decide: "do we want to partner with university X?"
  - To reflect and improve: "How does the partnership develop?"
  - To understand outcome: "What are the results of the investment?"
  - To monitor: "What are the investments, activities and results?"

How is the evaluation/decision organised?

- What will be used as evidence?
- What methods will be used to collect and analyse information?
- Who will decide? Who assesses?

Figure 1: The evaluation and its context

2. THE CENTRAL EVALUATION QUESTION

Questions regarding the relationship with certain strategies / policies / aspirations

- To what extent does the partnership contribute to strategy X / policy Y / impact Z?
- How do we ensure the partnership will contribute to strategy X / policy Y / impact Z?

Phase-specific questions

- **Phase one: before the partnership**
  - Who do we want to partner with and why?
  - What can the partnership deliver? To us (and who is us?), the partner, society?
  - What are the aims/goals and how can they be reached?
  - What are the potential risks? How are they mitigated?

- **Phase two: during the partnership**
  - What can be done to improve implementation?
  - What can be learned for other partnerships?

- **Phase three: Late in, or after, the term of an agreement**
  - Do we want to renew the partnership?
  - What has been achieved?

Figure 2: The central evaluation question

3. THE PARTNERSHIP AND ITS CONTEXT

Questions focused on the partners
- What external partners are involved?
- What is your institution's history with this partner?
- What departments are involved in the university?
- Are there any champions that play a key role in the partnership?

Questions focused on the goals and ambitions of the partnership
- What is the rationale for the partnership?
- How is (/will be/has been) the partnership formalized?
- What are the goals of the partnership?
- What are goals and expectation of the partner? Has this been discussed?
- How is the partnership implemented?

Questions focused on the partnership activities
- What activities are part of the partnership?
- What is the starting situation?
- Who is involved in the partnership?
- What are strategies for the partnership?
- Is there an implementation plan?
- Does the university make funding available?

Questions focused on expectations regarding the partnership
- What does success/value mean? And at what cost?
- What results are expected?
- What further impact is foreseen?
- What are potential risks? Perceived by whom? How about risk mitigation?

Other questions about the partnership
- What is the history of this partnership / collaboration?
- What funding opportunities are available?
- What regional/national/supranational policies are relevant?
- What institutional policy arrangements and contexts are relevant?

Figure 3: The partnership and its context

The project resulted into a handbook (EVALUATE project, 2022) that is available online (Open Access). It includes the evaluation framework with questions and examples; five of the case studies; and the literature review. The handbook also includes a section on lessons learnt, written by the international office staff. The lessons are:

1. Know your stakeholders and their (naturally diverse) interests. This includes the recommendation to invest upfront in the relationship with the partner, and arrive at a mutual understanding.

2. Integrate evaluation with existing data and systems. This includes practical recommendations, such as deciding on targets, the inclusion of internal stakeholders that are responsible for the implementation of the partnership and the collection of data.

3. Get to know evaluation methods. This includes the recommendation to make evaluation part of the management of a partnership and the option to use interactive and participatory methods, if only to come to mutual understanding.

4. Expect change in ideas about evaluation - and to invest time and effort. The officers concluded that their understanding about the power of evaluation changed radically as a result of the intensive discovery process they went through in the course of developing case studies: "In common with many experiences of radical change, our preconceptions were disrupted. We strove to find meaning. And finally, we came to terms with a new reality. It's also worth reflecting on the significant scale of this intensive discovery process - and ensuring that those involved have the time and resources they need". (EVALUATE handbook, 2022, p. 45).

The handbook was launched at the second and final in-person meeting during the International Association of Universities General conference. The conference took place at University College Dublin, October 2022.

5. CONCLUSION & DISCUSSION

The EVALUATE project was a learning journey for all. The governance philosophy of the various universities, the partnership activities, the goals of the partnerships and the relation to university strategies differ between the partners and cases. The lack of consistent and aligned evaluation practices was confirmed throughout the project. Consequently, partners realised that a

rigid framework with clear measures or benchmarks is not realistic or useful. Evaluation is best integrated from the start to the end of partnerships. If integrated well, evaluation is a cyclical activity returning in every phase of the partnership, underpinning decisions, and new actions. This was also recognised by the international officers.

Only through mutual exploration of the practice of international strategic partnerships, did it become possible to find ways to mobilise existing insights from the evaluation literature and integrate this in a meaningful way. As such, the creation of an evaluation framework was an experiment in co-creation, developing evaluation in practice with those using the framework. By working on the development of the framework from the start, it was ensured that the resulting framework fits existing practices and that it can more easily be integrated into ongoing partnership work. This enhanced the capability for implementation and allowed project participants to communicate results and spread evaluative thinking.

Our project to co-create an evaluation framework was innovative in a number of ways. Firstly, the framework provides a solution for university staff working in the areas of partnership development and evaluation. This is an area of need, given recent and current prioritisation of, as well as debates about international partnerships in both institutional, national and international strategies that concern university education and research. In addition, the co-creation with a project team consisting of academic evaluation specialists and international officers was key. The combination of academic and professional inquiry enabled the project to apply robust academic methodologies and scrutiny alongside professional experience and expertise in the field. Moreover, the project was complimentary to a wide range of other initiatives and can support the higher education sector to forge greater understanding of the impact of university partnerships. For example, the UK Research Excellence Framework (REF) highly values the impact of research. The impact of research often happens through partnerships – and this project provides a framework to understand the value of partnerships.

Most importantly, the co-creation approach fits with current calls for reforming evaluation culture (CoARA, 2022). First of all, the project steered away from purely quantitative approaches. Although some universities had a good overview of investments on the one hand, and outputs in terms of publications and funding on the other hand, it was agreed that good evaluation requires more than measuring what can be quantified. At the start, the evaluative cycle was introduced, that shows how good evaluation practice is integrated

throughout the life cycle of a partnership, and that a range of methods can be used to answer evaluative questions, developing mixed-method approaches (Better Evaluation, n.d.). In line with this, the project connected to current shifts in evaluation culture, moving away from accountability towards a formative role for evaluation (Molas-Gallart et al. 2021, Dinges et al. 2020). Moreover, it was stimulated to evaluate with the partner. It meant a shift from evaluation for accountability towards evaluation as communication device and mutual learning between partners (Spaapen 2015, Joly and Matt 2022). As such, the framework and its development contribute to novel approaches to evaluation policy that challenge current practices. In fact, the process approach can be viewed as an experiment, which can inspire the development of other types of frameworks and contribute to policy learning.

6. EPILOGUE

The framework has been developed with five European universities (four in EU member states) and one Australian university. There is, without a doubt, a bias in the framework. The six universities operate in a similar realm and can all be seen as global North, despite one clearly being located in the Southern hemisphere. English is the official language in three of the countries included and in the other three it is an important, if not dominant, language in academia. Universities representing the global South, and/or universities based in countries where other languages are dominant (Spanish, Chinese), were not part. Consequently, we are currently working to make the framework suitable for more global contexts, including new partners and case studies to continue the co-creation process.

Since the start of the project, there have been global developments that affect many people and aspects of life, including universities and their partnerships. Collaboration with universities from certain regions have become contested and there have been calls and actions to support colleagues from research organisations under threat. These developments stress the importance of international collaboration and solidarity between universities as well as the careful evaluation of international strategic partnerships.

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