Identifying the Components Required Supporting the Application of Effective Knowledge Management Activities in Higher Education Partnerships

Enis Elezi
University of Bolton, United Kingdom

Christopher Bamber
University of Bolton, United Kingdom

The purpose of this research is to use the conceptual model presented by Elezi (2017) and examine what are the requirements needed to apply successful Knowledge Management (KM) Activities in Higher Education (HE) partnerships. This research follows a subjective ontology, which leads towards an interpretivistic epistemological stance through the application of three semi-structured interview questions. Questions were posed to nine elite interviewees (EI) who have been involved in initiating, developing and managing partnerships of Higher Education Institutions (HEIs). The results of this research show that currently HEIs involved in partnerships apply KM Activities although not constantly or very effectively. Answers gathered from the EI infer that shared vision and values amongst partners, leadership and management, communication protocol and development of a KM strategy are essential in designing and applying effective KM Activities that allow HEIs to attain the institutional and partnership objectives.

Keywords: higher education partnerships, KM activities, shared vision and values, leadership and management, communication protocol, KM strategy

Introduction

The Higher Education (HE) sector is becoming more competitive, thus posing pressure on Higher Education Institutions (HEIs) to seek opportunities that minimise risk and strengthen competitive advantage in the long run (Beesley & Cooper, 2008; Larner, 2015; Gibb, Haskins, & Robertson 2012). As a response to the competitiveness of the sector, many HEIs have developed partnerships. Collaborations between partners rely on the extent and quality of knowledge being communicated amongst partners thus making Knowledge Management (KM) an important component in the development of partnerships. Studies show (Whelan & Carcary, 2011; Kim, Lee, Chun, &

Benbasat 2014; Gibb et al., 2012) that KM has a positive role in facilitating the development of HEI partnerships as it allows knowledge-based institutions (KBI) to develop intellectual capacities and to enhance institutional performance. Studies have shown that application of KM in HEIs has had a constructive impact on developing intellectual properties (Jandaghi, Irani, Mousavi, & Davoodavabi, 2014), students' skills and employability (Schmitt & Butchart, 2014), as well as on promoting new curricula and academic programmes (Larner, 2015). Tong, Tak, and Wong (2015) advise that a decent understanding of KM principles allows KBI, particularly HEIs, to demonstrate a proactive behaviour and seek to be innovative and strengthen their market position by exploring opportunities more effectively through collaborations. KM is a relatively multifaceted area of research and its complexity increases when discussed and analysed in the context of partnerships due to the nature of collaborative projects. A study presented by Elezi (2017) has identified a list of KM Activities needed to facilitate the development of HEI partnerships. Therefore, authors of this paper focus on identifying what is required to design and establish effective KM Activities for HEI partnerships.

Research Context

The research published by Elezi (2017) presents a conceptual model developed (named 'KM partnership tree,' see Figure 1) as a result of a critical review of literature. The model is presented using the tree analogy in order to demonstrate the connectivity between different parts of the model. For instance, the roots of the tree present the 'Behavioural KM Constructs' category and include elements of culture, trust, communication and absorptive capacities. The KM partnership tree has three branches with first on the left hand side being the branch of 'Partnership Factors,' followed by the second branch of 'KM Activities' and ending with 'Institutional Factors' as the third branch. The purpose of presenting the 'KM Activities' in the middle of the tree is to illustrate its role in allowing HEIs to consider, negotiate, develop and manage collaborative opportunities. Therefore, this paper seeks to understand what drives forward the application of 'KM Activities' and allow HEIs to perform and reach institutional and partnership objectives.

This research makes sole use of a conceptual model developed by Elezi (2017), as a result of literature related to KM and HEI partnership development. The author acknowledges the limitations that derive respectively of a conceptual model that is based only on the literature and has not been tested or assessed in the context of UK HE industry. However, the conceptual model seeks to inform the reader with the fundamental KM concepts, themes and activities identified as important and necessary for a successful HEI partnership. Although, the conceptual model is literature-based, it
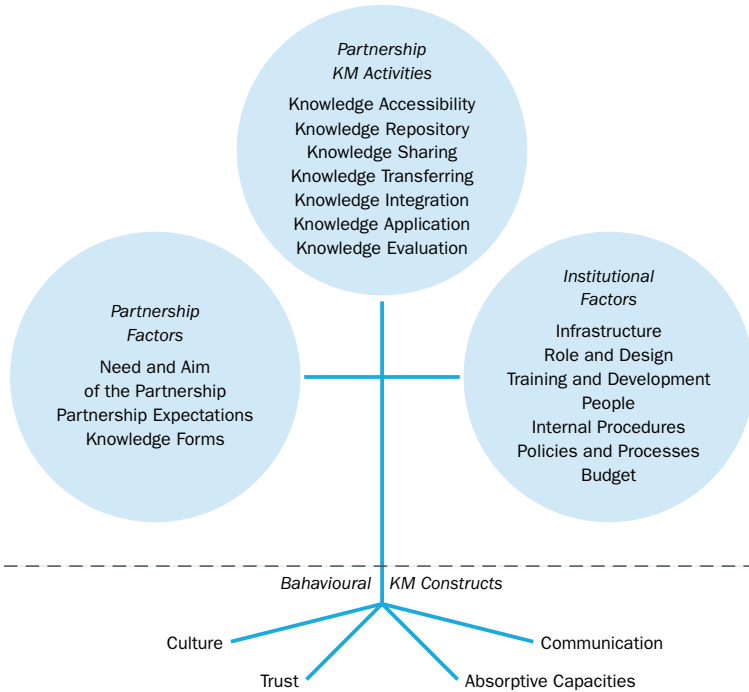
Figure 1 shows a conceptual model with three large blue circles connected to a central trunk, and five branches at the bottom.

Partnership
KM Activities

Knowledge Accessibility
Knowledge Repository
Knowledge Sharing
Knowledge Transferring
Knowledge Integration
Knowledge Application
Knowledge Evaluation

Institutional
Factors

Infrastructure
Role and Design
Training and Development
People
Internal Procedures
Policies and Processes
Budget

Partnership
Factors

Need and Aim
of the Partnership
Partnership Expectations
Knowledge Forms

Bahavioural   KM Constructs

Culture

Trust

Communication

Absorptive Capacities

Figure 1   Conceptual Model of KM Partnership Tree

seeks to elaborate on the role of KM by embracing a holistic stance and explaining the affects of KM activities in supporting the integration of HE institutions in developing a HEI partnership. Nevertheless, the conceptual model can be further developed through additional research of a qualitative and/or quantitative nature. Further research is required to examine and/or test the identified KM construct behaviour, partnership and institutional factors, as well as KM activities following the literature review in order to enhance and strengthen the relevance and applicability of the model in a real life scenario.

Literature Review

This literature review focuses on presenting studies related to the middle branch of the KM Partnership Tree presented as 'KM Activities' in the conceptual model designed by Elezi (2017), who identified a set of KM Activities that should take place for an adequate application of KM. According to Elezi (2017) 'KM Activities' branch includes seven stages and consist of knowledge accessibility, repository, sharing, transferring, application, integration and evaluation.

Knowledge accessibility focuses on providing the required logistic support to members of the partnership to access the required knowledge that initially starts by identifying the sources where knowledge is stored. Knowledge is very dynamic in nature (Jandaghi et al., 2014) and is transformed continuously and resides in individuals, departments and institutional levels. It is vital to not only identify the type of knowledge individuals need and where they can find it but also how should it be extracted to bring attention to quality-related issues.

Research published by Basque, Paquette, Pudelko, and Leonard (2014), Brewer and Brewer (2011) and Elezi and Bamber (2016) emphasise the importance of gathering and storing new and relevant knowledge within an institutio's system that allows accessibility. Lane (2011) and Hemsley-Brown and Oplatka (2010) explain that technology has had a significant impact in the gathering, storing and accessibility of knowledge within institutional context. Developing knowledge repositories allow HEIs not only to enhance their performance but also to protect the intellectual capacities that can define the competitive advantage of the institution. A knowledge repository that is continually developed and altered in response to market changes increases the opportunities for further institutional development and risk minimisation, Beesley and Cooper (2008) argue. Knowledge sharing has been subject of several studies (Foskett & Maringe, 2010; Larner, 2015; Reich, Gemino, & Sauer, 2014), which have explained its role in encouraging the exchange of knowledge and information related to partnership objectives, as well as in facilitating the integration of partners and their tasks and actions. The sharing of knowledge is not always at the expected intensity and depth studies suggest (Wang & Noe, 2010; Schmitt & Butchart, 2014). However, when knowledge sharing practices are conducted adequately, it is a representation of a positive work environment, development of trust and desire to assist and grow individually and institutionally (Fidalgo-Blanco, Sein-Echaluce, & García-Peñalvo, 2015).

In addition, knowledge transfer has been another subtopic that has received considerable attention in KM studies and, contrary to knowledge sharing, it is an activity that deals with transferability of specific knowledge upon which members of a partnership are expected to take action and reflect it within institution's policies, practices and processes. In other words, knowledge transferring is instigated with a clear purpose and target, and is used by HEIs to develop their intellectual capacities and institutional strategies, some scholars argue (Natek & Zwilling, 2014; Liebowitz & Frank, 2016). The transferability of knowledge between partners is expected to develop new knowledge, thus it is important to ensure that institutional systems are functioning properly and allow the integration of new knowledge as a way to attain the desirable outcome(s).

Table 1   The Three Semi-Structured Interview Questions

1 In what way do you think KM can assist HEI in formulating a sustainable partnership?
2 At what extent does your current institutional infrastructure support the KM initiatives?
3 Can you recall any knowledge leveraging practices applied by a HEI when operating in partnerships?

As discussed by Natek and Zwilling (2014) and Liebowitz and Frank (2016), the transferability of knowledge is designed at a strategic level. However, its integration relies with what Patriotta, Castellano, and Wright (2013) define as knowledge brokers or senior members of staff, who have an adequate comprehension of HEI strategic intensions. Therefore, assigning individuals in charge of KM practices aids with new knowledge absorption and sharing within the institution, thus helping with knowledge storage and accessibility. Knowledge integration allows an HE institution to alter and adjust its current knowledge capacities in the face of competition and recent sector development.

Elezi (2017) explains that application of knowledge is seen as an indicator that can be used to assess the effectiveness of knowledge transfer and knowledge integration between HE partners. Nevertheless, it should be noted that the application of newly integrated knowledge is very influenced by the leadership and management, institutional infrastructure, and training and development programmes in place to support the application of new knowledge. As pointed out in the literature (Holsapple, 2013; Lane, 2011), knowledge application activity might require institutions to remodel and reorganise institutional managerial structures.

The last activity of the model proposed by Elezi (2017) consists of knowledge evaluation, whose purpose is to appraise the processes of allowing HEI to attain the desired outcomes as a result of knowledge exchange and development. Incorporating activities of a knowledge evaluation nature allows HEI to have continuous checks, whike assessing if the applied activities and undertaken actions are leading the partnership towards the desirable outcomes and if alterations are needed. As explained by Elezi (2017), the application of evaluative practices provides opportunities to address issues related to financial management, market share and institutional performance.

Research Methodology

The ontology of this research relies on a subjective approach and epistemologically makes use of an interpretivistic stance. The researchers designed and applied a qualitative methodology using elite interviews and posed three semi-structured in-depth interview questions (Table 1) to nine elite interviewees (EIs) of British HEIs, all based within the UK. The inter-

views were conducted between June 2017 and October 2017 in four HEIs located in the Northwest and Southeast of England. In terms of demographics, the sample consisted of two females of an age group of 55–65 who had been working within the British HE sector for a minimum of 18 and 25 years, including operational and strategic positions while working in HE partnerships. The other seven EIs were males aged 45–75 with a minimum experience in the HE sector of 9 years and a maximum of 32 years. The extensive and multidimensional experience gathered from the EIs was of particular importance, as it allowed the researchers to understand the challenges experienced by HEIs when entering and operating in partnerships, as well as to understand the role that KM can have in facilitating collaborative undertakings.

The development of questions aimed to gather information from three different perspectives related to the role of KM in developing HEI partnerships, the institutional infrastructure in supporting KM initiatives and the application of knowledge-leveraging practices from HEIs when working in partnerships. The average time for each interview was 16 minutes and respondents were voice-recorded. Afterwards, interviews were fully transcribed to proceed with the analysis of results through the application of thematic analysis. According to Casell and Symon (2004), thematic analysis allow the researcher to identify and pinpoint common patterns among the answers collected and to be able to respond the questions and phenomena being investigated. Therefore, the application of thematic analysis allowed the researchers to extract common themes, concepts and key phrases gathered from EIs, which were later discussed and analysed in the context of this research.

Results

The elite interviewees where asked three semi-structured questions in order to gather professional insights regarding the application and effectiveness of KM Activities within HEIs when working in partnerships.

The first question asked was 'In what way do you think KM can assist HEIs in formulating a sustainable partnership?' The purpose of this question was to extract information in regards to the usefulness of KM in the development of HE partnerships. There was a common understanding between respondents that KM supports the development of partnerships particularly through knowledge sharing and knowledge transferring. However, respondents noticed that the challenges lay on knowledge integration and knowledge evaluation. As indicated by respondents', the challenges with knowledge integration and evaluation are mainly related to the desire and commitment to share, departmental and institutional change and communication. Respondents discussed the importance of KM from a strate-

gic and operational level, emphasising that establishing institutional systems strategically does not necessarily guarantee that new knowledge is absorbed and used effectively for partnership opportunities. For instance, EI 3 stated that:

> We have a CRM but it's not used effectively. We have held lots of conversations with clients for potential opportunities and there is a lot of information and knowledge we can extract from these conversations but no one has really looked at them with the aim to understand and maximise the potential. This demonstrates lots of inefficiencies and a lack of absorbing knowledge needed to develop partnerships.

Whereas EI 3 examined the KM at a strategic level, EI 6 offered an operational perspective and highlited the importance of solid internal operational processes and systems that would allow the HE institution to perform and meet partners' expectations and enhance its institutional capacities through knowledge creation and knowledge application activities. EI 6 stated that:

> I insist in having robust systems in place to document the created knowledge that will help you in understanding the partnership better and that could be about managing a course, managing a delivery, managing legalities or contracts and all of these things. So starting with knowledge creation, followed by knowledge organisation, which is the documentation of processes and procedures, and the application of that knowledge . . . and that goes back to the knowledge creation cycle again. And, by knowledge application, I mean enhancing the delivery of the programmes and modules and bring that knowledge to the new modules and pass over that knowledge to the next batch of students, while there might be the same programmes in different countries and to make it better by reflecting on it as a result of knowledge creation.

Respondents argued that knowledge evaluation is a KM activity that does not occur very often and is limited to informal conversations between colleagues or standardised feedback forms that may be applied for certain processes or experiences within the partnership operations. Answers indicate that lack of KM evaluation might be due to institutional culture and lack of commitment from leadership and management of a HE institution.

The second question asked was 'At what extent does your current institutional infrastructure support the KM initiatives?' that sought to understand if the current infrastructure of HEI supports KM initiatives. The overall understanding was that HEIs aim to support KM through a range of KM initiatives that encourage individuals and departments to work collaboratively with rep-

resentatives of other HEIs. Respondents noticed that the encouragement of collaborations between different HEIs, mainly in England, comes as a response of measurements such as Higher Education Funding Council for England (HEFCE) through the application of the Research Excellence Framework (REF) and the Teaching Excellence Framework (TEF). For instance, universities going through the REF and TEF assessments receive higher scores when demonstrating collaborative publications or knowledge-based projects with colleagues of other universities.

Furthermore, according to respondents, HEIs make use of skills sharing sessions, CPD days and departmental meetings involving representatives of the HE partner as an approach that aids application of KM Activities. For instance, EI 2 stated that her HEI applied a very effective KM initiative called '10 minutes with the senior leaders' and stated that 'she gave 10 minutes to each of the senior leadership team, 10 minutes to outline something they saw as a challenge since the previous meeting.' The '10 minutes with the senior leaders' practice provided an opportunity for the leader to become aware of issues and challenges faced at departmental level, as well to make use of an extensive level of strategic and operational knowledge found amongst senior leaders in order to tackle the identified problems. However, one of the respondents explained that skills sharing sessions not always work particularly as academics tend to demonstrate a protective behaviour and seek reassurance that their contribution will be acknowledged through any sort of publication or social status.

Other responses gathered indicated that HEIs tend to use KM initiatives, although it was noted that the staff of these institutions do not particularly use KM terminology, as pointed out by EI 6, who has earned a PhD within the area of KM and has been directly involved in managing HE partnerships in his institution. EI 6 stated therefore that:

> I don't think we explicitly say here are our KM initiatives. We do have pretty robust systems built in to make sure knowledge about the partnerships in respect to market demand analysis and financial performance, together with partners' expertise, is captured. I believe we do have quite robust systems that allow us to capture knowledge from our partners, or from the partnerships we are in, and use it to the benefit of the stakeholders involved in.

The understanding from the responses was that the creation of designated teams between HE partners and the establishment of clear and effective communication channels have a very significant impact on the effectiveness of KM initiatives. Communication allows the HE partners to understand if the partnership is developing but, more importantly, it helps to assess if the KM initiatives applied have been effective or not. The qual-

ity of knowledge being shared and transferred when evaluated can examine the effectiveness of KM initiatives and activities.

The third question posed was 'Can you recall any knowledge leveraging practices applied by a HEI when operating in partnerships?' and aimed to understand the nature of knowledge leveraging practices implemented by HEIs when involved in collaborative projects. Respondents highlighted that KM leveraging practices are mainly reflected through the preparation of new learning materials developed between partnering HEIs, academic conferences and workshops, research publications and meetings where partners report and discuss on the development of the partnership and potential alterations to further enhance the collaborative performance. Respondents explained that the intensity and effectiveness of applying knowledge leveraging practices is related with the involvement of lecturers, heads of departments and high executives. Interestingly, EI 1 discussed the importance of knowledge evaluation within his institution and stated:

> We also have a procedure in place where at the end of the project we have not only to prepare a report, usually known as 'evaluation report,' but also to disseminate the knowledge gained in terms of collaborative projects with other departments. Like this, they were also aware of what was going on but also of issues that they could maybe face in future collaborative projects or partnerships.

Similarly to the response of EI 1, EI 9 pointed out that the application of evaluation reports appeared to be an effective practice as it permits the distribution and absorption of as much relevant knowledge as possible at no extra cost. The newly attained knowledge, shared through written reports and formal and informal discussions or presentations amongst HE members of staff, allowed experienced and less experienced staff to gather together and use their knowledge and expertise to tackle departmental and institutional partnership issues and challenges. EI 9 also discussed the role of teaching and learning forums and committees as very effective KM leveraging practices, when applied rigorously. The common understanding amongst the EIs was that the application of knowledge-leveraging practices related to teaching and learning practices is crucial and is reflected on HEIs' performance audit reports conducted by governmental bodies. Such audit reports are accessible for the public and will affect a HEI institution's reputation when it comes to brand image, reputation and possible future collaborations. Nonetheless, EI 8 noted that, due to lack of institutional culture, strategy and clear communication channels, the application of knowledge-leveraging practices by HE partners is not always supporting or encouraging knowledge sharing, and negatively impacts the element of trust amongst partners. EI 8 explained that:

[. . .] often leverage is used badly because leverage tends to suggest that one of the partners feels more powerful, superior [. . .] But if the other partner is open and clear, and agrees to operate under certain circumstances to some extent. But you don't want to constantly feel that you are being asked to do certain things in order to be able to receive something new or additional, because the usage of leverage erodes the trust and that is how it worked in my experience.

Generally speaking, the results indicate that HEIs seek to employ knowledge-leveraging practices that help with knowledge sharing, transferring, absorption and integration. However, this research shows that, if HEIs enter into partnerships with a superiority behaviour or attitude towards the other HE partner, then knowledge-leveraging practices might not work effectively. Therefore, not benefiting from the knowledge-leveraging practices amongst the partners raises barriers in terms of sharing and communicating the required knowledge and, as a consequence, frustration and misunderstanding levels increase, leading towards a discontinuation of the partnership.

Discussion and Analysis

The research shows that overall British HEIs tend to apply KM Activities internally but also externally, namely, when working in partnerships. However, as results show, the applicability of KM Activities is not always conducted appropriately and effectively, which raises many issues related to management of knowledge. As explained by Holsapple (2013), knowledge is fluid and dynamic, changing shape and context very often and, if an institution cannot control that adequately, it can then become even more challenging to manage knowledge at a partnership level. Therefore, it is essential for a HE institution to realise that the lack of knowledge and the potential for growth and development of the required knowledge is accumulated and used correctly.

Results show that, first and foremost, the effectiveness of the 'KM Activities' branch in HE partnerships is influenced and driven by the establishment of shared vision and values of participating institutions. It is of a paramount importance for HEIs involved in partnerships to understand each other's visions and values, as this aids the understanding of expectations, the institutional contributions and the benefits of the partnership. The establishment of shared visions and values between HE partners allows for the cultivation of trust, which in return can facilitate the integration of the partnership and supports institutions to explore further other potential collaborative opportunities.

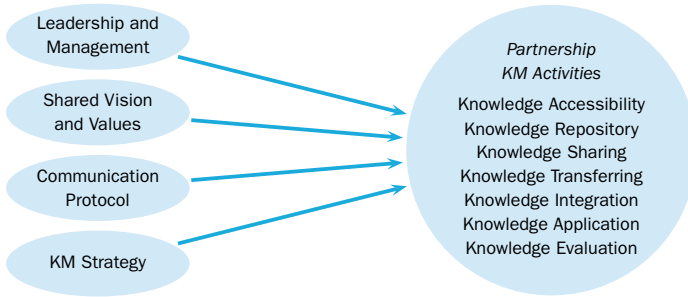As results display, it is the responsibility of the HE institution's lead-

Figure 2   Requirements for Establishing a Successful Application of 'KM Activities' in HE Partnerships

ership and management to establish and nurture an institutional culture where individuals and departments are encouraged to share knowledge, by making it accessible and available to the interested stakeholders. Operating under a centralised culture or demonstrating micromanagement behaviour will have a negative effect on employee engagement and involvement. Lack of employee engagement and involvement causes issues with knowledge sharing, integration and application, as employees feel restricted, ignored, not part of the team and, more importantly, do not have any rewarding incentives for channelling and storing knowledge.

Results infer that developing a communication protocol and strictly complying with is essential in achieving effective application of 'KM Activities' in HE partnerships. The results of this research tie well with previous studies (Natek & Zwilling, 2014; Liebowitz & Frank, 2016; Cranfield & Taylor, 2008) where scholars have discussed the importance of communication in collaborative projects. However, when comparing results of this research to existing studies, it must be pointed out that development of a communication protocol is as important as the partnership itself and should be formally discussed and agreed at a strategic level, once the partners have decided to collaborate.

Lastly, results indicate that the HE institution should formulate a KM strategy that reflects a collaboration based on shared visions and values. That means HEIs should have the support of a leadership and management seeking to nurture and develop individuals and teams participating in the partnership, and more importantly they should present a clear guidance and structure regarding communication in terms of content, depth of information and frequency.

Figure 2 represents the requirements for successful application of 'KM Activities' that will yield institutional results and allow a HEI to achieve outcomes that would not be able to attain if working independently.

The development of knowledge is an ongoing process and includes several actions and processes between human beings and social entities, as explained by Fidalgo-Blanco et al. (2015), Larner (2015), and Reich et al. (2014). The complexity of developing knowledge increases with the involvement of stakeholders, of different interests and expectations in a given project or enterprise. Therefore, it is necessary to design and implement 'KM Activities' that will actually allow individuals and institutions to grow and develop as a result of knowledge exchange. Figure 2 illustrates that establishing a common ground between HE partners in terms of vision and values is essential for allowing institutions to consider collaborative projects. Once the establishment of shared visions and values is demonstrated through actions, it is the responsibility of the leadership and management of a HE institution to support and assist the development of the partnership from the strategic to the operational level.

Nevertheless, a decent leadership and management not always yields positive results regardless of the good intentions and level of support, due to lack of communication at an institutional and partnership level. Therefore, this research points out that it is mandatory for the partners to establish and agree on a clear and formal communication protocol that is regularly controlled and evaluated in order to ensure a progressive development of the partnership. The last step is to launch a strategy that is based on a shared vision and values, supported through a constructive leadership and management, that operates under a clear and effective communication protocol and, more importantly, that identifies list of actions, resources, expertise and knowledge required to achieve the agreed institutional and partnership outcomes.

Conclusions

The results of this research demonstrate that KM Activities are essential in facilitating the composition and progression of HEI partnerships. Answers collected through EI semi-structured interviews explained that the identified KM Activities are not always conducted effectively and four important elements are required to be considered from the HEIs when operating in partnerships. Firstly, the establishment of a common shared vision and values among partners. Secondly, support and nurturing from the leadership and management of the HEI at a strategic and operational level, allowing individuals, teams and departments to perform against the expected outcomes. Thirdly, it is of a paramount significance to formulate and institutionalise a communication protocol at a partnership level, in order to allow HEIs to develop institutional synergies and demonstrate synchronised actions. Fourthly, HEIs need to avoid taking *ad hoc* actions or simply responding to requests and challenges, but rather they should exchange each others'

expertise and institutional infrastructures in order to produce a KM strategy that clearly explains the involvement and expectations of individuals and departments at an institutional and partnership level when working in collaborative projects.

Future Work

Further research could be conducted quantitatively to examine statistical relationships between the four identified elements (shared vision and values, leadership and management, communication protocol and KM strategy) and KM Activities needed to facilitate the development of HEI partnerships.

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Enis Elezi is a PhD Research Student at University of Bolton undertaking a research focussed on knowledge management and in the development of Higher Education partnerships. Currently Enis is involved in delivering busi-

ness subjects and tutorials for HND students at Organisational Learning Centre-OLC (Europe) in Manchester and Bolton. His areas of research interests include knowledge transfer, organisational learning and trust and inter-organisational. *ee3mpo@bolton.ac.uk*

Christopher Bamber has been a Managing Director and Dean of the Organisational Learning Centre (OLC) for 18 years, prior to that worked as Operations Manager for a multinational manufacturing company for 8 years and worked as Quality Manager for a leading UK manufacturing organisation. Chris now draws upon over 35 years of industry and academic experience to provide OLC with strong leadership and direction. He is a Director of Studies at the University of Bolton for PhD candidates in the Business School and research interests include analysing the roles of entrepreneurs, intrapreneurs and lean thinkers in the modern enterprise. *cbamber@olceurope.com*