

RESEARCH ARTICLE

Reimagining Global Higher Education Partnerships

Madeleine Le Bourdon*

University of Leeds, United Kingdom

m.lebourdon@leeds.ac.uk

ORCID: 0000-0002-1222-8745

*Corresponding author

Anne Tallontire

University of Leeds, United Kingdom

A.M.Tallontire@leeds.ac.uk

ORCID: 0000-0002-8339-8442

Abstract

Global Higher Education Partnerships (GHEPs) have become a key component of higher education institutions' international strategy, aimed at developing international learning communities and engaged global citizens. Varying in type, scale and practice, these educational connections offer teaching and learning opportunities involving collaboration at a transnational and multinational level. Yet, the complex global structures and power dynamics in which institutions are embedded present challenges for building equitable and reciprocal partnerships. This paper draws on research capturing the experiences of staff at a UK university forming and maintaining such partnerships, to understand the range of approaches, opportunities generated, and obstacles faced in fostering ethical partnerships. Findings reveal tensions between the individual and the institution and calls for higher education communities in the 'global north', in particular those within the European and North American context, to reflect on four aspects for more ethical partnerships: confronting complicity in enacting global inequalities; centring motivations on ethics of care; investing in human and environmental relationships; and creating space for open and honest dialogue across every level of GHEPs. The article argues that GHEPs must be reimagined by engaging with epistemologies that go beyond those that shape global higher education and support transformative pedagogies. We assert that institutions have a duty to look at equity and reciprocity within their institution too, to ensure they are open to envisioning and co-creating a more ethically ambitious landscape for GHEPs.

Keywords: Global higher education; global higher education partnerships; critical internationalisation studies; equity; reciprocity; ethical education partnerships

Introduction

Internationalisation has become a strategic priority of higher education institutions (HEIs), shaping not only the way we approach research but also teaching and learning. Largely associated with the growth in the international mobility of students, Global Higher Education Partnerships (GHEPs) more broadly look to encompass all educational experiences that expand beyond their institution national home (Marginson, 2026). From virtual classrooms to joint assessments, collaborative modules or team teaching, bilateral and multilateral GHEPs can be found across modules, programme, or even as extracurricular activities. Such initiatives are framed as imperative to ensure universities provide high-quality and world-changing education. This is often expressed instrumentally in terms of skills development for students who will become a 'globally minded workforce' and offering 'direct and indirect benefits' for countries involved in exchanges (Coimbra Group, 2025, p.1).

The internationalisation of education within HEIs strategy has become synonymous with the wider critique of the neoliberalisation of higher education (Brandenburg & de Wit, 2011). From the intense focus on student recruitment to the competition stoked through global rankings, scholars have argued that the market-driven nature of these policies has devalued the internationalisation of global higher education. Instead of building collaboration, cooperation, and opportunities for knowledge exchange, internationalisation has arguably shifted further towards competition, reinforcing the dominance of Western institutions, and within the UK, limited regulatory oversight of educational activities that span national borders.

Yet, GHEPs also offer the potential to look beyond, and even challenge, Eurocentric epistemologies and pedagogies. Teaching and learning across and with communities offer different ways of knowing, helps us to confront our own positionalities and can reorientate our educational goals of grades and rankings, to social impact and solidarity (Pashby & Andreotti, 2016). Global collaboration is, thus, not only about knowledge exchange but with space and time, creates unique opportunities for original perspectives, ideas, and skills to flourish (Brandenburg & de Wit, 2011; Montgomery & McDowell, 2009).

Research repeatedly has shown that the current global higher education system does not foster an environment for such partnerships (see for example, Pashby & Andreotti, 2017; Stein et al., 2019; Sumida Hauman et al., 2019; Wits, 2020). Critical Internationalisation scholarship, a growing field of research that directly responds to and critically interrogates the expansion of global higher education, highlights the inequities and injustices both framing and being enacted in this process (Buckner & Stein, 2019; Lomer et al., 2025; Stein, 2017, 2021; Stein et al., 2019). Here scholars highlight the demographics of who can participate in international teaching and learning activities, and the knowledges that come to dominate content, both which reflect the broader hierarchies of white privilege and Eurocentric understandings of our world. Through a centring on an ethics of care and the honouring of pluriverse knowledge, these scholars argue that we can reimagine global higher education, one which fosters an ecosystem of equity and reciprocity.

Equity here is not simply about equal collaboration and outcome but instead recognising the historical and structural inequalities within Higher Education and seeking to address them through frameworks of justice (Vavrus & Pekel, 2015). Thus, equity is a relational practice that looks for alternative ways to building and sustaining partnerships.

Similarly, understandings of reciprocity here draw on the concept of ‘thick reciprocity’ where relationships are not simply based on the exchange of resources but “emphasizes shared voice and power and insists upon collaborative knowledge construction and joint ownership” (Jameson et al. 2011, p.264). In both these ways we seek to look to understand how GHEPs can be transformative rather than simply transactional (Zuchowski et al., 2017). The notion of ecosystem is also important to reflect, noting its ubiquity as a framing to understand both education and university systems, and also critiques that have challenged the blindness of such framings to power relations, for example recognising racial inequities that have pervaded higher education relations from admissions, through campus experiences to relations with partners and arguing for ecosystem approaches that explore the influence of history and context in diverse ways (Renn et al., 2023).

To work towards an ecosystem that is equitable and reciprocal, it is imperative we recognise that universities are embedded in complex structures of inequality that they are complicit in enacting and that inevitably shape internal institutional power dynamics (Altbach, 2004). Capturing how this comes to shape lived experience within HEIs enables us to interrogate how internal power dynamics impact the equity and reciprocity within the institution, that inevitably impact the equity and reciprocity in their relationships externally.

This is where we locate our research, to understand the barriers and opportunities staff face in building and sustaining ethical GHEPs within UK HEIs and thus, how this impacts the cultivation of a global higher education ecosystem of equity and reciprocity. The paper begins by exploring scholarship that problematise the internationalisation of higher education, before turning to locating GHEPs within the operational and policy contexts of UK HEIs. Though we recognise that we cannot fully understand the whole process of building and sustaining ethical GHEPs without dialogue with our global partners, this article argues that we must first self-reflect as individuals and an institution to understand the internal to understand our complicity in creating barriers to the creation of equity and reciprocity in the ecosystem of global higher education. We conclude that such reflection is the first step in moving towards more ethical partnerships, alongside the need to re-orientate our motivations to an ethics of care. To ensure we can do this we call for HEIs to provide more time, recognition and resourcing for relationship building between home staff and partners, and critically that open and honest dialogue is established across all actors within these partnerships.

Literature

The internationalisation of higher education is often seen as a moral obligation for HEIs, that by definition it will lead to ‘peace and mutual understanding’ (Brandenburg & de Wit, 2011, p. 2). Literature on internationalisation often suggests that in partaking in internationalisation activities students are able to encounter diverse perspectives and thus prepare them to work with those from different cultural backgrounds (Buckner & Stein, 2019). Though often vague in its definition across HEIs, universities often reflect these sentiments in their strategy and policies, with commitments to fostering globally aware and engaged graduates (Stein, 2017). The suggestion here is that the internationalisation of the education they provide will support work towards global and sustainable development (Bourn, 2011; Buchan et al., 2007; Pashby & Andreotti 2016).

Yet, building on responses concerned with the ethical and political roots of internationalisation (Brandenburg & de Wit, 2011; Marginson, 2006), an emerging body of literature has sought to examine and challenge the rapid growth in international educational initiatives. Alongside ethical and political concerns, 'critical internationalisation studies' also calls for a deeper engagement with relational issues within the internationalisation of higher education (Critical Internationalization Studies Network, n.d.). Embedded within broader structures of global inequality and injustice, the relationships and partnerships within and between HEIs inevitably reflects similar trends (Altbach, 2004). The term GHEP is often used to describe the collaboration between two or more HEIs and/or international actors (Adams & Lanford, 2021; Maringe & de Wit, 2016). In this sense GHEPs are not solely associated with student and staff mobility but all pedagogical activities that hold a learning dimension that involves an external global actor. It is with these dynamics that this paper is concerned, considering the ethics of these relationships from the perspectives of staff within one particular HEI.

To do this, the work of critical internationalisation studies scholars helps us to locate these partnerships in the wider debates of internationalisation as well as understand the dynamics at play within them. Two salient points of discussion within the literature are central when considering the ethics of GHEPs: the neoliberalisation of higher education and how we may reimagine global higher education.

Neoliberal and hierarchical frameworks of global higher education

...the critique of internationalization in higher education is at a turning point, and the concept of critique requires an update, refreshment, and deep questioning taking into account both the new world and higher education order and old colonial continuities. (Stein 2021, p. 1172)

As Stein (2021) reflects here, is that current dynamics of global higher education are devaluing internationalisation through neoliberal policies, and thus further perpetuating damaging hierarchies of knowledge. Brandenburg and de Wit (2011, p. 2) argue that this devaluing is evident in that despite internationalisation having become synonymous with 'doing good' the substance and impact of it has deteriorated. Rather than serving as a vehicle for cooperation and collaboration in creating a better world, we have seen internationalisation reinforce competition between institutions.

More broadly across the sector we can see how the evaluation of success based on revenue, reputation, and rankings at an institutional level also come to shape ideas of success for individuals (de Wit, 2020). Within research we can see staff striving to obtain large grants and publications in leading journals. In education, these neoliberal imperatives can be seen through the emphasises on enrolment numbers, competition to attract international students, and strategies overly focused on league tables and rankings, such as the National Student Survey (NSS scoring) in the UK. This in turn creates huge pressures on staff performance across and between institutions. Such imperatives can be seen in the need to compete for places at high-ranking universities, gain the highest grade, and recognition for extra-curricular pursuits (Pashby & Andreotti, 2016). Similar to the drive for research outputs, there are financial imperatives and key performance indicators (KPIs) related to recruitment and

student satisfaction that shape job security for higher education staff. It is global university rankings that predominately concerns the institution to ensure they obtain recognition, funding, and student recruitment within a competitive market. The globalisation of higher education only adds to this, fuelling further competition and hierarchy (Pashby & Andreotti, 2016). In recognising the economic and social capital in internationalisation of education, states also set policy agendas that support these endeavours. Within the UK for example, the government responded with the increasing competition in 1999 by developing national branding for higher education 'Education UK', that was later incorporated into the 'Britain is GREAT' campaign under the 2010-2015 coalition government (Lomer et al., 2018, p. 135). The impact of such policy not only further fuels economic dominance of the UK, and English-speaking institutions more broadly, but in marketing HEIs as a destination for learning, such initiatives entrench problematic hierarchies of knowledge and the idea of education as a commodity. Thus, rather than internationalisation diversifying the knowledges taught within HEIs, we can therefore see how the sector reflects the wider power dynamics of the international arena, with European and North American institutions dominating the market, tables and rankings (Marginson, 2006; Stein et al., 2019), often forming their own closed elite hubs (Adams & Lanford, 2021).

The predominant relationship therefore within GHEPs becomes transactional, rather than collaboration for the cultivation of knowledge. Despite the external visage of openness, many global higher education partnerships centre around a desire to reflect an elite status with a small number of identified strategic partners (Adams & Lanford, 2021, p. 111). Adams and Lanford (2021) argue that rather than forging open collaborative, diverse groups together, these partnerships are often closed relationships based on resource, knowledge and financial exchange for prestige. For many critical international studies scholars, these partnerships often reflect problematic imaginaries of the 'global south' as lacking knowledge and skills in education that the 'global north' can provide (Pashby & Andreotti, 2016; Stein, 2021). Instead, they call for the acknowledgement and interrogation of 'inequitable systems of power and knowledge and unequal patterns of the distribution of resources and symbolic value' (Pashby & Andreotti, 2016, p. 78).

Stein (2021) posits that without confronting our individual and institutional role in structures of neocolonial exchange, we cannot claim to be decolonising our universities. Higher education has been framed through whiteness where the norm and standard of knowledge is one that has been produced in the 'global north'¹ (Hiraldo, 2020; Pailey, 2019). A dynamic in which HEIs in the 'global north' dictate GHEPs thus embeds epistemic inequalities and reinforces a fixed idea of knowledge. Buckner et al. (2021) argue that they do this while simultaneously using ideas of diversity and inclusion to promote their brand. Their research revealed that whilst marketing strategies across Canada, the United States, and the United Kingdom used visuals of a diverse campus, the policies and pedagogies of these institutions rarely explicitly outlined actions for addressing racial injustices within international strategies. Instead, internationalisation is something which is seen as outwards

¹ We acknowledge that the 'global north' and 'global south' are imperfect concepts that could reinforce ideas of boundaries. We use them here to reflect the historical and contemporary imbalances that have come to privilege many countries in the northern hemisphere and other English-speaking countries, through the degradation of the global majority (Mignolo 2011). The use of single quotations is used to reflect some element of distance and imperfection of the term (Pashby and da Costa 2021).

(Alexander & Mohanty, 2010), an opportunity for elite home students to experience the international or the recruitment of international students to the institution. Thus, Buckner et al. (2021) suggest that though universities celebrate diversity, they only celebrate those that support certain ideas of knowledge and aptitude. This speaks to the work of Indigenous scholars within the Americas, such as Sumida Hauman et al. (2019), who state this is a result of the very foundations of the university, structured not for liberation of oppressed or even promote equity or reciprocity but to continue the production of western epistemologies and legitimise these practices. Critical internationalisation studies thus calls not to just simply replace one framework with another but to move towards a reimagining of how the university knows and relates both internally and externally (Stein et al., 2019).

Reimagining global higher education

The *critical* element of 'critical internationalisation studies' helps us to interrogate the why behind the internationalisation of higher education to understand the ethical challenges within partnerships but also opens up the possibility to reimagine global higher education. Moving towards this alternative way of knowing and doing started with the recognition of the neocolonial dynamics that have come to shape our imaginary of global higher education, and that continue to create damaging norms and power relationships within mainstream internationalisation. Recognising that these are not natural states of being supports decolonial endeavours and creates space for scholars and HEI practitioners to 'pluralize and deepen conversations about the ethics of internationalisation' (Stein et al., 2019 p. 22). Their call here reflects the diversity of thought and experience within even singular institutions let alone the global arena of HEIs. Internationalisation has escalated the exposure and connection to a pluriversality of epistemologies that thus come to interact and reshape through multiple networks of research and education. In other words, '[T]he university is a living and constantly changing organism that interacts with its external environment in countless ways' (Adams & Lanford, 2021, p. 119). In creating space for a multi-voiced community dialogue, we can reorientate the practice of internationalisation from one of competition and hierarchy towards an ecosystem of collaboration and cooperation.

Equity and reciprocity are seen as essential here, cultivated through an ethics of care and collective responsibility (Deuchar & Gorur, 2023). Such an ethical orientation requires an ongoing, relational practice across scales of higher education that involves self-reflexive conversation between staff, students, and institutions (Stein et al., 2019). Pluriversality, then, is not a rejection of internationalisation but a reimagining of it, honouring multiplicity, and centres partnerships on ethics of care. Care here entails recognising individual and institutional responsibility in pushing for equity while also creating space for relationship building to foster genuine reciprocity within global higher education partnerships. Stein et al., (2019) argue that rather than finding universal, singular frameworks for reshaping policy and practices within global higher education partnerships, instead we must seek 'a deeper analyses and a cultivation of ecologies of knowledges in educational research' (p. 25).

It is here that we locate our research, looking to understand how the varied ontologies and lived experiences come to shape the ethics of global higher education, focusing on a particular context. We start by looking one particular HEI to honour the pluriverse ideas present within this community and understand the dynamics of the internal and external factors shaping this 'organism' (Adams & Lanford, 2021; Kothari et al., 2019). Our focus on

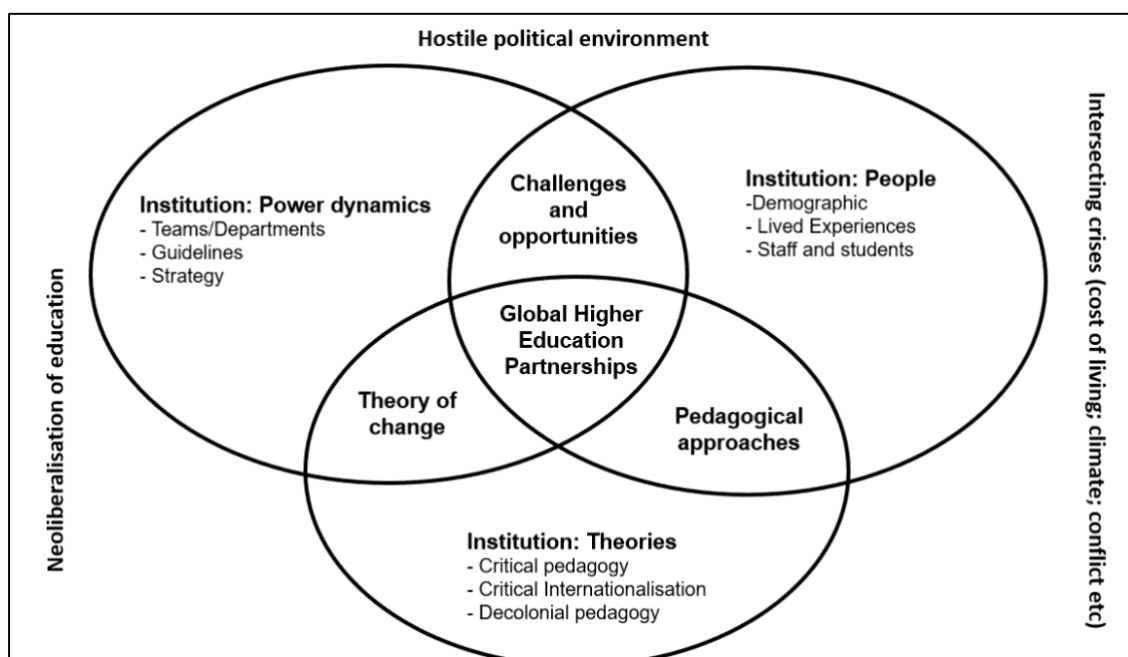
equity and reciprocity is thus derived from this call to reimagine high education through an ethics of care and collective responsibility (Deuchar & Gorur, 2023). Our methods seek to honour the relational practice scholars call for to learn from reflexive practices and conversations between those within our own ecosystem (Stein et al, 2029). Suminda Hauman et al. (2019) argue that such discussions on 'social responsibility and reciprocity of individuals and institutions participating in internationalization are rare' (p. 11) but essential in addressing the extractives and elitist nature of internationalisation. We do not seek to present a blueprint for how to create equity and reciprocity in global higher education partnerships but instead use this analysis to surface and consider alternative ways of knowing and doing. In bringing staff from across one university into a collective reflective conversation we seek to deepen reflexivity on our complicity in unethical internationalisation, encourage dialogue between individuals and the institution, and hope to cultivate a reenvisioning or even a reimagining of global higher education partnership (Stein, 2021).

Context: UK higher education

All HEIs involved in internationalisation are embedded in complex structures of global inequality and injustice (Altbach, 2004), but HEIs in the 'global north', and particularly those which sit in former colonial powers, wield more historical and contemporary power and potentially damage. The history of UK higher education is intertwined with colonialism, slavery and white supremacy, often under a veil of 'epistemological ignorance' that plays down historical and continuing inequities (O'Neill, 2025a), where "those racialised as white – and their interests and knowledges – as the norm, while rendering 'Others' different, deviant, abnormal or marginal" (p. 141). Its structures have therefore been built reflecting the power structures that have upheld such systems of oppression. Whilst there is considerable postcolonial and critical race scholarship within UK HEI, this rarely permeates to institutional or even individual practices which frequently reflect the racial hierarchies within the wider context. Western/white knowledge is upheld as the 'norm' to which 'other' knowledges offer alternatives, and thus we continue to centre pedagogy through Eurocentric ideas and practices that uphold the inequity we see within global higher education.

To understand where our research fits within this context we began by acknowledging that the experiences of staff in cultivating ethical global higher education partnerships cannot be understood without understanding how they are shape and interact with systems of knowledge and power. Acknowledging the historical legacies and roots of a university is essential to understanding how equity and reciprocity are constructed within the institution and how it interacts with actors externally. Alongside side this we must also consider the current wider political economic, social and environmental dynamics that frame the UK HEIs. Therefore, alongside the continuous surveying of the literature and reflecting on the historical roots of institutions, we constructed a Venn diagram (see Figure 1) that enabled us to situate our project within the broader contemporary, complex framings that shape lived experiences. It is important to emphasise that these are not the only or fixed factors shaping the realities of building and fostering GHEPs. Instead, these draw from our engagement with some of the key current components affecting HEIs in the UK.

Figure 1: GHEPs in the context of UK higher education



Around the outside of the Venn diagram (see Figure 1) are core external factors that HEIs are embedded within: the neoliberalisation of education, a hostile political environment² and intersecting crisis. The neoliberalisation of education can be seen across the sector in multiple ways from the tripling of fees for both home students [to £9790 per year as of 2026] and international students [between £11,000- £30,000 per year] (British Council, n.d.), to the competitive nature of university rankings to attract students (Baltaru et al., 2022). Meanwhile, recent restrictions on immigration policies impacting international students in the UK (Mittelmeier, 2024) and increasingly polarised public views of universities (O'Neil, 2025b) have reinforced a sense that universities and in particular internationalisation activities face a hostile political environment. Amongst the backdrop of intersecting crisis from the climate, cost of living and ongoing conflicts, it is important to recognise how such policies, strategies and factors create pressure for staff (both academic and professional service) as well as for students, thus impacting their ethical approach to partnerships (Stein & Andreotti, 2016).

The three circles of the Venn diagram (see Figure 1) speak to the institutional elements that affect how GHEPs are built and sustained — power dynamics shaped by teams, guidelines and strategies; pedagogical theories — both explicit and implicit-motivating partnerships; and the demographics and experiences of individual's involved in these partnerships.

Where these intersect, they create realms of both influence and impact that become key components in creating the core rationale, motivation, and activity of these partnerships. Institutional strategies and policies shaped by explicit or often more implicit theories of what HEIs create theories of change that become the central rationale for internationalisation. The

² This was a distinct narrative policy twist for the UK starting with Theresa May's Conservative government from 2017, see <https://www.theguardian.com/uk-news/2017/nov/28/hostile-environment-the-hardline-home-office-policy-tearing-families-apart>, but has become more pervasive since.

expertise and theoretical interests of staff come to create the pedagogical approaches that motivate the diverse learning experience. The relationship between the institution and the people it employs and educates become both sites of challenge and opportunity for ethical global higher education partnerships.

Articulating this wider context enables us to generate a deeper understanding of the external factors that impact the lived experiences of staff cultivating these global education activities. Through our analysis we used this as a guiding tool to consider the location of potential structural issues affecting staff and to aid reflection on the findings, including where there may be spaces for gestures towards alternative ways of knowing and relating (Stein et al., 2019). Moreover, it is within these intersections that we can explore equity and reciprocity, both as motivations and outcomes.

Methods

To understand the challenges and opportunities to fostering and sustaining equitable and reciprocal global higher education partnerships we, the authors, started by reflecting inwards, exploring our own institution. The University of Leeds (the University), a large university situated in the north of England, is one of the 24 Russell group UK universities that pride themselves on being research intensive, with a large international body of students (McCabe, 2025). The University hosts a student body of approximately 37,000 of which around 32% are international students from 137 different countries (UCAS, n.d.; University of Leeds, n.d.a). A global vision is central to Leeds' internal strategy for research and education with the aim to 'foster and embed a global mindset', with a commitment to building 'educational partnerships with the global south', and thus 'develop engaged global citizens' (University of Leeds, n.d.b). The University has identified 'strategic partners' that it sees as holding 'mutual strength and shared interest' in addressing the UN sustainable development goals through collaborative research and education opportunities; of the five strategic partnerships two are located in China, one in South Africa, and two in Germany (University of Leeds, n.d.c).

Working in a HEI in the UK, we are conscious of both our privileged context based on history but also how this privilege and resultant inequality is reproduced within GHEPs that embed unethical and unfounded norms. We also need to see ourselves as part of this and to avoid "academia's tendency to externalise things....by addressing problems as 'over there' or 'back then'" (Idahosa & Bradbury, 2020 p. 33). As members of staff, we cannot ignore the part we all play within the ecosystem that is the institution. It is crucial that we confront the discomfort in challenging the problematic dynamics within our own institutions (Le Bourdon, 2022), and indeed the discomfort that is at the root of true learning processes (Scharmer, 2025). We see this practice as a continuous process of self-reflexivity and dialogue, that goes beyond recognising what is unjust, but to question the systems and processes that reproduce that injustice (Idahosa & Bradbury, 2020). Our first step in this process was to examine looking at the lived experiences of staff working on such partnerships within our own ecosystem.

There is a wide array of global education partnerships happening at the University, some with strategic partners, but many others evolving from personal, disciplinary links. A

challenge that motivated the funding for our project was how educational projects evolved, better understanding their purposes, the relationship between education and research (especially in our research-intensive context), and if and how they might be better supported and sustained. Therefore, the starting point of this project was to capture the different global partnerships with educational elements across the University. In line with the call from critical internationalisation scholars, creating an opportunity for dialogue throughout this project was central to 'pluralize and deepen the conversation' around the origins and ethics of these partnerships (Stein et al., 2019, p. 22).

Our research approach had three interconnected phases (see Table 1) that allowed for the data to be generated, synthesised, and reflected on with participants to ensure that we were effectively capturing their lived experience and the overall ecosystem of collaboration. We followed the University's ethical review process, ensuring informed consent, building trust through confidentiality, and engaging in a process of de-identification of individuals, whilst being true to the trajectories of their narratives (ethics ref BESS+ 0986-1428). As two white western women working in a UK Institution, we know there is an inevitability to how our positionality impacts our work and that this cannot be mitigated with even the most thoughtful of methodologies. However, in designing our research approach we continuously sort to draw on the guidance from critical international scholarship that we explored through literature review — prioritising self-reflexivity, challenging norms and assumptions, and looking to a diversity of perspectives.

Table 1: Research Methods

Phase	Activity	No. of Participants
Phase 1: Literature	Review of the literature: critical international studies; higher education; global education; decolonial pedagogy	N/A
Phase 2: Data collection	Stage 1 Staff Survey: scoping the global education partnerships activities	48 Staff Responses
	Stage 2 Focus Groups: themed on equity and reciprocity in global education partnerships.	Five focus groups of 33 participants
Phase 3: Reflection and dialogue	Stage 1 Internal Workshop: sharing findings and outputs with staff (day)	45 Staff attendees
	Stage 2 External Workshop: sharing findings and outputs with critical friends (90 minutes)	Four external critical friends.

Our second phase aimed to capture the experiences of staff be that academics, professional service staff, educators, or administrative support, fostering and sustaining global education partnerships. First, we scoped the partnerships in play at our university. To do this, we distributed a survey via staff email networks, both academic and professional, asking for basic information about partnerships, the challenges and opportunities they were facing, and

if they would be willing to be part of the next phase of research. In total, 48 staff from across the university and with varying role profiles, responsibilities and levels of experience and seniority completed the survey. This data gathering exercise provided an understanding of the diversity of partnerships, highlighted core commonalities in experiences. The survey findings, together with a preliminary categorisation of types of partners in which the university was involved derived from examining an internal database informed a framework for sampling participants and designing targeted focus groups (a preliminary version, see Figure 2, which we iterated as our understanding developed).

These focus groups were built from the survey or identified groups that were reflected in the survey who were seen as key stakeholders in fostering such partnerships, including staff supporting study abroad schemes and supporting partnership development. We undertook five focus groups each lasting approximately 90 minutes with a total of 33 participants. These focus groups captured the reflections of staff collective and individual experience in creating educational activities with other HEIs around the world. The experiences shared in this phase formed the core of our findings that we analysed through thematic analysis, identifying and interpreting patterns and commonalities through these conversations. This process was done manually by both researchers through the reading of transcripts, highlighting quotes that substantiated or encapsulated the emergent themes. As a team we discussed the themes, highlighting which were specific to a category of partnership and which had more institutional or broader relevance to enable the categorisation of commonalities and in relation to the broad themes of equity and reciprocity (Harding, 2013). Using sticky notes and a white board, we mapped the themes visually to help identify the core axes of what became Figure 2 and to help create the partnership types that we identified. Through an iterative process, we then generated the scenarios to reflect both the partnership types and the lived reality of the staff who were involved in them, not as objective truths, but as narratives that we hoped would make the challenges understandable. We aimed for the scenario design to enable workshop participants to explore potential solutions, rather than dwell on the problems. In developing the narratives underpinning the scenarios we were careful to balance protection of identities with being true to the issues they were navigating, while trying not to homogenise experiences. We recognise that as two white women from the UK that our privileges mean we cannot completely grasp some of the experiences staff reflected. But in a commitment to honour the voices of our participants we worked reflexively, through continuous self-examination of how our positionality was impacting the research and findings (Le Bourdon, 2022; Said, 1978). This included referring to the Figure 1 Venn diagram to locate experiences with the broader context, engaging iteratively on the work of scholars from the majority world to reflect on our findings, and critically, practicing self-reflexivity to continuously interrogate how our own positionality was shaping how we understood the data (Andreotti 2007). This is not an exact science, but we hope in this awareness and reflexive practices helped us to move towards 'co-constructing' knowledge with our participants and reflect the nuances of their experiences (Bilgen et al., 2021). Though such an approach can be seen as 'messy' it allowed us to understand the nuances and complexities of these lived experiences (Sumner & Tribe, 2008).

Thus, two outputs were developed from the findings: scenarios that brought together common stories reflecting complexities, opportunities and challenges staff faced; and a manifesto for change. We explore these in turn in their own right in this article, but in addition these two outputs were also essential to phase three where we sought reflection and

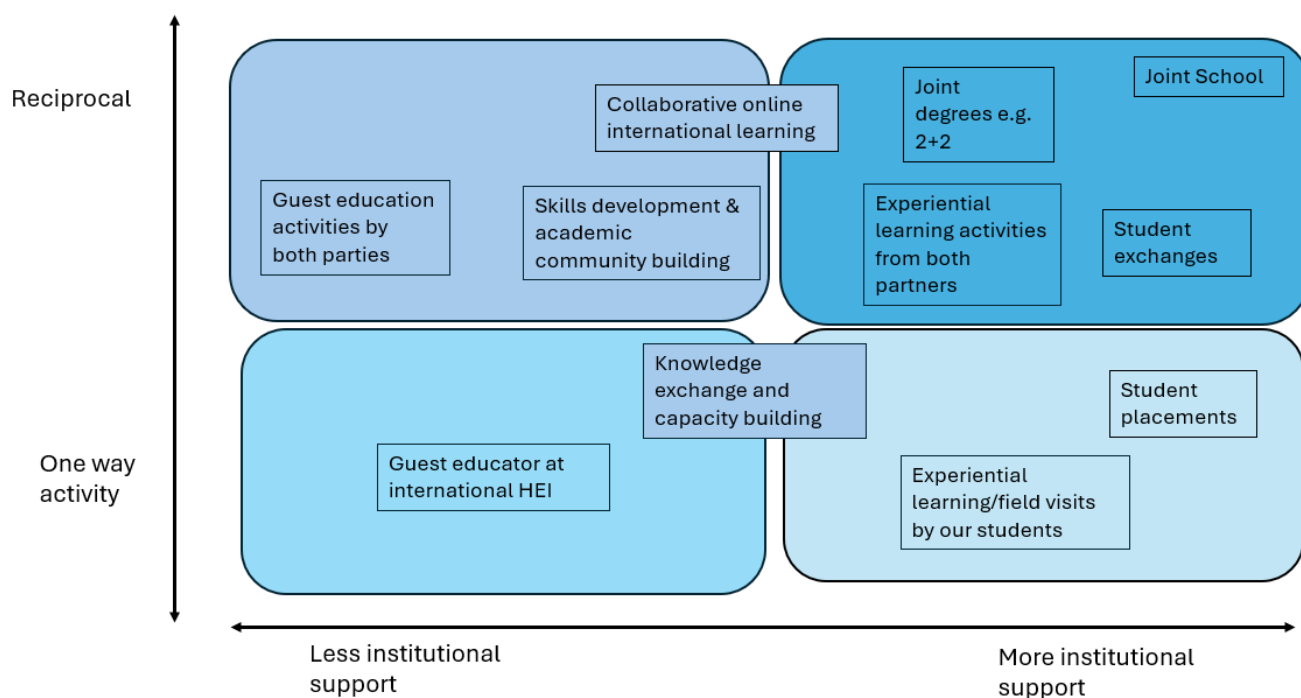
dialogue from staff. This helped clarify and validate the outputs, enabled participants see where their voices had been heard, and supported a move towards a reimagining beyond the confines of practice and ideas at the University of Leeds.

Thus, the first stage of phase three brought together 45 staff, some of whom had taken part in the survey or focus groups, others who had expressed interest in the project, and some staff with professional service or academic leadership roles who received explicit invitations to reflect and feedback on the stories and the manifesto through a day-long workshop. Their feedback was then used to evaluate, edit, and validate our outputs.

Stage two of this final phase gained external input to our findings from four identified scholars in the broad field of internationalisation to act as 'critical friends', in an online workshop. These workshops played a key role in furthering our analysis, reflect on our positionality in the research and confront the discomfort of where we too were either enacting or overlooking unequal power dynamics. This iterative critical dialogue from participants and critical friends supported the generation of an understanding of the challenges and opportunities in curating and sustaining global education partnerships within our ecosystem. Our findings are not a blueprint for all HEIs in the 'global north' or beyond, but we hope that our methodological approach provides an example of how to build dialogue into research on higher education communities.

Findings

Figure 2: Examples of the diversity of partnerships



Before exploring the themes from the conversations we had with staff, it is helpful to acknowledge the range of activities in which colleagues were engaged that were rooted in global education partnerships. Figure 2 depicts examples of the partnership activities that were mentioned by our colleagues. They had different levels of formality, which related to how they were linked to strategy (education or international) at institutional or faculty level, and as result the extent to which they were supported through time, guidance or resources. Partnerships also differed in terms of the pedagogies adopted, in that some were focused on curricular learning such as field visits, guest lectures and including online learning as compared to often one-way 'global opportunities' through student placements for our own students or knowledge transfer activities that were less reciprocal in terms of how partners benefited. Variation was also present in terms of whether they involved travel (when and how) or not (online activities such as COIL – collaborative online international learning). Amongst the most supported activities were the more formal 'transnational education' programmes whereby teaching activity is undertaken collaboratively with a partner, where the student spends all or part of their time overseas and where their studies lead to an award. Perhaps because there is already an institutional framework for these partnerships, whether they are recognised as 'strategic', they were least mentioned by our research participants. The institutional database featured some of these, at times supported directly by the university's international strategy or global opportunity teams; others seem to be working independently, of which professional colleagues had little awareness.

Themes from conversations

Several key themes emerged from the analysis helping to provide a detailed picture of the realities of seeking equity and reciprocity not just in partnerships but more broadly within the institution itself. Many colleagues were motivated to generate partnerships in order to have a positive impact on their learners and the world more broadly, "to make the world a better place". There was too, a recognition that the institution itself officially committed to having a role in broader society and that generating graduates who make a positive contribution upon the world is key to this. Pedagogical innovation was also identified as a core element or driver for some of these partnerships enabling students and staff to push beyond their own knowledge, build participatory opportunities with peers, and create spaces for fostering community, embodying decolonial and participatory pedagogical approaches. However, others were motivated more by the idea of sharing knowledge or capacity building that were less obviously reciprocal.

Whilst often inspired to create partnerships, many staff expressed frustration at the barriers and challenges they faced in ensuring that the partnerships were a positive one for all involved. Much of the rhetoric in focus groups centred around the tensions found between individual staff and the perceived 'institution'. One participant stated:

It's nice to get a high-level steer to do these things, but the actual operationalisation of it we don't get support...so we can't and don't deliver on what at high level we think is university strategy...people are just so kind of exhausted by barriers and these processes that lack of support for the processes. (Academic with a GHEP)

The barriers highlighted between the individual and the institution often centred on the bureaucratic hurdles, lack of support and the trust in relationship building. The first two overlap, with staff indicating that they didn't even know where to begin when wishing to establish a partnership or look to support for doing so. Many felt that they were signposted in different directions, required to fill out several forms for committees and still find they were unsuccessful in formalising their partnership. For most of the staff we spoke to much of this work was done in their own time, without workload and recognition. While there was a need for some kind of return or impact to substantiate inclusion in official work plans over the long-term, the following testimony was indicative of a wider frustration amongst staff keen to innovate:

...if we are asking our educators to do all these projects with no workload, really, with very little institutional support, it's hard to expect that we will have good evidence of impact. (Academic building a GHEP)

Instead, institutional support seemed to be obtained either through sympathetic gatekeepers or those that fit with the strategic vision of the university, rather than the pedagogical motivations or rationale of staff. This speaks directly to neoliberalisation of education highlighted in the literature. The hierarchical framework of global higher education has come to determine which HEIs are able to collaborate, often based on resource, knowledge or financial exchange for prestige (Adam & Lanford, 2021). At the University of Leeds, these strategic partners are all based in major BRICs or European countries, with established or growing reputation for academic excellence. Given that we have reflected that the global higher education arena, and thus academic excellence is shaped by western, Eurocentric ideas of knowledge (Altbach, 2004; Pailey, 2019; Stein, 2021) we can come to see how inequity thus becomes part of who and which global education partnerships are supported even internally within institutions.

While for some this was largely determined by the internal politics at the university, other staff saw this as a fundamental issue with trust between the institution, staff and partners:

We're not trusted to not be paying someone dodgy in the global south, not trusted to make decisions about who we talk to. We're not trusted to do this diplomacy, right? That's essentially what that is. And instead that's being replaced by, marketing strategy, numbers etc. So it's almost, we're not trusted to do education and we're not trusted to make partnerships. (Academic building a GHEP)

The quote above demonstrates how neoliberal motivations at a strategic level meet the racial hierarchies that come to shape the academic resulting in feelings of distrust in the ecosystem of partnership building. Staff expressed feeling the institution did not trust them to foster GHEPs, or the 'correct' ones. In some cases, staff avoided formalising their partnerships at all to avoid them being rejected, in opposition to neoliberalism or even to avoid embarrassment at the university's behaviour towards partners. The relationships had been built through disciplinary and scholarly interactions, cultivating trust and cooperation between individuals nurtured overtime. Thus, many staff felt that these relationships could

not be honoured or sustained ethically through the institutional processes. Hospitality was seen as a key barrier here, with staff reflecting that when they visited partner institutions they would be 'looked after', i.e., given recognition and respect, through invitations to meet institutional leaders, taken for dinner or had their expenses paid for. Staff reported that their own institution projected hostility to their collaborators, through procedural and transactional interactions that were damaging not just for the pedagogical collaboration but made them feel unwelcome.

The rejection or resistance to these organic connections staff had drawn and developed from their own networks was particularly felt by international staff, who stated they felt that their own expertise or personal knowledge was not as valued as those of strategic partners. As one Academic developing a GHEP put it, this: "makes me think about like, the international, we are international outwards. Rather than international inwards".

This perspective speaks directly to Buckner et al., (2021) and Alexander and Mohanty (2010) who highlight how internationalisation is seen as an outward pursuit by HEIs in the 'global north', who use the unequal and damaging global power dynamics to their advantage, rather than reflecting on how to challenge them through such global learning opportunities. Without looking inwards at our own ecosystem, we overlook the ability to cultivate new ways of knowing and doing that honour the pluriversality of knowledge and experience within our own communities (Shilliam, 2015), and that can lead to a reenvisioning of our ethical approaches (Stein et al., 2019).

Ecosystems of dialogue: Internal and external workshops

Our findings from conversations with staff highlighted two core needs for supporting our ecosystem in moving towards more ethical and reciprocal approaches to global higher education partnerships: a space for continuous and open dialogue to reflect and share, and a commitment to taking social responsibility for ethical relational dynamics within partnerships. These two aspects came to shape our outputs that were explored at our subsequent workshops: one internally with University of Leeds staff and one externally with selected 'critical friends'. We aimed to create space for multi-community dialogue where together how we could move towards a reimagining of GHEPs at the University of Leeds. Both workshops were facilitated by an external consultant with experience of community development and dialogue around governance. This enabled the two researchers to set the scene and then stand back from the discussions, helping to ensure that we heard participants' voices and reactions, and could observe interactions.

The first workshop involved a facilitated conversation around these preliminary outputs. The first output we called 'stories', a series of five scenarios that we curated through personas which brought together multiple threads of experiences staff had shared in the surveys and focus groups. The second was a set of commitments to be upheld by the institution and the individual to ensure we were centring equity and reciprocity in our global education partnerships, presented as a 'manifesto'.

Stories

As we have explored, the data highlighted a multitude of diverse and shared realities in fostering and sustaining ethical partnerships at the University of Leeds. As researchers we wanted to ensure that we had both accurately reflected these experiences and that these

could be used to deepen the collective conversation on GHEPs, whilst preserving identities and confidences. To do this we curated five 'stories' presented through five personas. These personas did not directly reflect any one colleague's experience but brought together several threads we had identified in the data. Each persona told a different story of complexities that different staff holding different roles, experiences and identities had met in establishing their educational partnership. In the internal workshop we asked participants to explore, reflect on and consider pathways towards more ethical partnerships. See Box 1 for summary of the personas.

Box 1: Summary of personas

Harry wants to build on a research project where an opportunity has arisen to develop a programme to support PhD students at his partner organisation's institution. He is unclear where to start in establishing this branch of his partnership.

Mariam wants to develop a co-taught Masters between Leeds and a partner institution in the global south that is a strategic partner. However, the time pressures to launch the partnership sacrifice building trust and respecting customs of the partner.

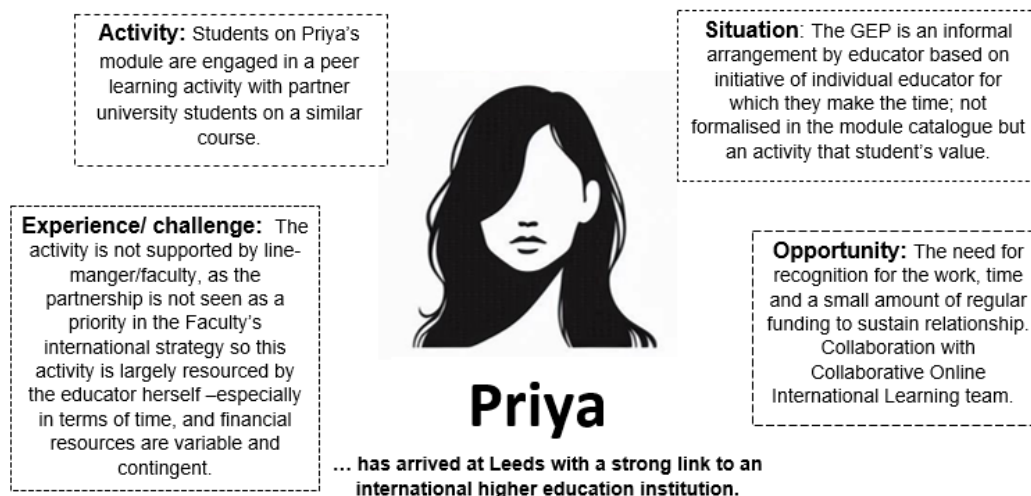
Femi has designed a pedagogical activity with a strong decolonial and participatory lens that they want to develop with partners to support learning in both universities, but the partners are not regarded as strategic partners.

Jo is inspired to build on community engagement locally. She wants to establish a knowledge hub between partner HEIs and local communities, that are of equal benefit for all but has limited resources and capacity.

Priya has arrived at Leeds with a strong link to an international higher education institution and has developed a peer learning activity with partner university students on a similar course, but the value of this is not recognised in her school.

To further illustrate the outputs drawn on in the internal workshop to stimulate discussion with participants, Figure 3 shows how we presented the story of Priya. This aims to represent the situation of staff with strong links to other HEIs and a solid pedagogical rationale who struggled to gain the support they needed due to the partnership not being a strategic partner for the University. Thus, Priya faces challenges in obtaining resources and time to work with her contact HEI to ensure the partnership is as equitable and reciprocal as possible. In this case, Priya keeps the partnership informal and does not get recognition for the extra work.

Figure 3: Example of one 'Story' reflecting staff members' experiences



We shared these scenarios through a world café style activity at the workshop. This activity saw groups respond to the different stories by adding comments to a large sheet on the table, walk around to other tables comments to read and respond to other groups' reflections. This opportunity to discuss and respond to each scenario and to build on others' reflection helped stimulate rich conversation, validated participants' experiences, building solidarity through sharing. It also cultivated a space for thinking together beyond the structures of current dynamics. This was supported via an 'opportunity' section that we offered to give a suggestion of how to do this through institutional and individual actions.

In the conversation during the activity and the debrief, staff shared where they had faced similar experiences, where they saw the roots of these challenges and offered ways how we could collectively address such challenges. The activity was both validating for us as researchers that we had captured some of the realities staff were facing, and for staff to hear other colleagues' experiences too. Through these discussions we witnessed staff sharing tips, asking each other questions and collaborating to think about how we could work better as a community. Creating a network for conversation, shared resources and support could help alleviate some time pressures that prevented staff from finding ways to ensure partnerships were more ethically sustained or to create relationships built on trust. Narratives that presented the tension between the individual and the institution also created some tension within the workshop. At one point we asked colleagues 'who is the institution'?

This led to a helpful discussion in which we heard from colleagues at senior levels in varied leadership roles (professional and academic) and the challenges they faced, alongside staff leading or supporting partnerships on the ground. While these differences in responsibility and action remained a clear place of distinction for staff, there was also a recognition that we are part of the institution and have agency and thus, ethical responsibility too. We see this as an important foundation for framing how we reenvision global education partnerships at Leeds. An ecosystem of collective ethics of care and responsibility shared by, and in conversation with, the institution and individual (Idahosa & Bradbury, 2020).

Manifesto

At the heart of the findings was a need for change, for creating an environment that supported ethical dynamics inwards to support global partnerships inwards. It became clear through the survey and focus groups that staff wanted to establish a strong guideline that committed colleagues and the university to upholding ethical values and practices. The findings reflected core commitments centring on three aspects: clarity on the motivations for partnerships by all, reflected in the university strategy, and component frameworks for education, research, internationalisation, and enabling systems; a pledge to fostering equity, reciprocity and sustainability in all partnerships; and recognition of the pedagogical practices and those involved.

Building on these three core overarching commitments we then went back to the key findings to outline sub-commitments that reflected on how we could address these realities. As staff had clearly outlined the distinction between the values and actions of individuals and the institution, we wanted to ensure we echoed this in these commitments. However, we were keen to ensure we did not reinforce this dichotomy but create a collective endeavour where we identified differing levels and dimensions of power and responsibility across our ecosystem. These commitments came to shape what we named a 'manifesto' as a declaration of intention towards create an environment for equitable and reciprocal global higher education partnerships (see Table 2).

The manifesto was presented at the internal workshop with just the three core commitments and the sub-pledges headings, while the cells in columns two and three were left blank. We asked staff for feedback on the core commitments and tasked them with adding pledges to the blank cells, using sticky notes. Following the workshop, we compared the pledges and comments with the statements we had written ourselves based on our understanding of the literature and reflection on interview and focus group findings. This validating process strengthened the manifesto in two ways. Firstly, it allowed us to elicit general feedback on the idea of a manifesto. Whilst this was seen as bold, there was some scepticism about the idea of how much this would be taken on board by staff and the university. However, there was more consensus around the broad principles that the manifesto document collated. Secondly, many pledges participants made in the workshop reflected the pledges that the project team had drafted based on the research findings. Feedback from the event enabled us to refine the original commitments we drafted to capture the greater nuance and to ensure it read more inclusively. Creating this dialogue in the workshop helped generate a sense of ownership of these commitments and shaped the pledges beyond our own framings as researchers, that are inevitably shaped by our positionalities.

Table 2: Manifesto global education partnerships at the University of Leeds

MANIFESTO	Individual	Institutional
1) We will recognise the strategic role that Global Education Partnerships play for the University, learning from them and recognising the implications of the University's position in the sector globally		
Motivations	I will reflect on and express my motivation- strategic, pedagogical, personal.	We will set out our motivations for generating GEPs.
Structural inequalities	I will recognize my own position in wider structural inequalities	We recognize its position in wider structural inequalities
Impact	I commit to learning about and from our impacts from my GEP	We commit to learning about and from our impacts from GEPs
2) We will make a commitment to developing and fostering equitable, reciprocal and sustainable partnerships		
Relationships	I will pursue and sustain equity and reciprocity in recognition of building trust and strong relationships.	We commit to developing and fostering equitable reciprocal and sustainable partnerships based on trust
Institutional Structures	With my partner, I will co-create a framework for sustaining our partnership that reflect the realities of both institutions.	We will organise systems of support and dedicate time within the institution to develop and sustain GEPs that meet its strategic objectives
3) We will ensure that appropriate pedagogies underpin practice and educators involved are recognised		
Pedagogy	I will adopt pedagogical approaches that embody equitable and reciprocal learning environments, as well as the wider education motivations of both institutions	We will ensure GEPs are informed by global Scholarship of Teaching and Learning
Connected International Strategy	I ensure that my proposed and existing GEPs draw on and inform the Manifesto	We will recognise GEP collaboration as central to the wider international strategy; practitioners and scholarship recognised and valued for this work through workload and resources to innovate and sustain GEPs.

Following this internal workshop we then presented our findings and outputs to 'critical friends', a selected group of academics whose scholarship centres on internationalisation of higher education and/or have led on internationalisation policy at their university. This conversation led us to question the limitations and possibilities from our findings and outputs. In short, it posed us more questions than answers or solutions. Our critical friends validated the need to start by reflecting at our own and our institution's role in shaping the inequity of global higher education. Here, the need to "understand the different perspective... different positionalities of staff" also shapes the realities of building equity and reciprocity. Recognising the pluriversity of knowledge and experiences of our own staff through the scenarios was seen as a way in which to recognise that we are not just

international outwards (Alexander & Mohanty, 2010). Discussions in our external workshop also pushed us to interrogate the language we used such as the difference between the externalising of using 'international' and the inclusionary nature of using 'global' to build collective responsibility and solidarity. The limitations our critical friends raised highlighted areas for further reflection and research. A key point was made from a scholar holding a key managerial position at a HEI in Africa:

... it strikes me also that you're doing it alone, so in some ways you write the story about global education... I think there's one more step that needs to be there, and that step is really to use your own findings and your own thoughts and what you got out of the workshop alongside partners from the global south. (International Critical Friend)

This pushed us to reflect if we can ever understand the equity and reciprocity of our global education partnerships without being in conversation with our external partners? What we can say, is that we have come to interrogate and understand our own ecosystem at the University of Leeds, and particular to recognise the dynamics of equity and reciprocity that create conditions for staff to have the time, resources and agency to build ethical partnerships. We see this as a first step in fostering an environment for multi-community space for honest and open dialogue that honors and works with a pluriversality of voices and experiences.

Conclusion: Towards a Reimagining

As reflected by our critical friends, a reimagining of GHEPs requires a bigger, more inclusive discussion that centres voices who have been systemically marginalised and impacted by the unequal power dynamics and structures that shape the international field. Indeed, our findings, reflections, and commitments are not a blueprint for all. We recognise that there is not a singular, universal framework for fostering ethical partnerships. Instead, we sought to turn inwards to deepen our "analyses and a cultivation of ecologies of knowledges of education research" (Stein et al., 2019, p. 25), by creating discussions about the social responsibility of individuals and institutions from the perspective of a HEI within the UK. By turning inwards, listening to the pluriverse of voices within our own institution we have cultivated a deeper conversation on how to work towards a reimagining of global education partnerships at the University of Leeds. We hope that this creates space and reflection for other institutions and their communities to do the same, and that the process we have taken can be inspiration for HEIs to deeply consider ethics within their own ecosystems.

In working towards more ethical framings and practices, as an institution and individuals must confront our complicity in both the historical and contemporary role of creating and embedding unequal and extractive dynamics in higher education. In doing so, we must then reflect on our motivations for doing this aspect of internationalisation, to ensure this is not coming from a place of neoliberalised or neocolonial exchange but is better linked to our commitments to the sustainable development goals with respect to education. Instead, we must base our partnerships and pedagogies on an ethics of care and sustainability, looking beyond immediate wins to how these share practices that are pedagogically driven and that might have a longer lasting social impact.

In establishing and maintaining partnerships, the development of relationship building needs to be honoured as an essential process to build trust between individuals, institutions and the wider community. Practically this requires time, flexibility, and resources for hospitality or to support access to technologies, embodying intercultural awareness. Ideologically, this requires us to look beyond the transactional relationships that dominate practice, to see the people behind the partnerships that we seek to build between institutions.

We should also recognise that the structural relations around partnership building risks overshadowing the pedagogies that shape a global approach to education, especially at institutional level. Exchanges that may become transactional, rather than relational; they may focus on individual student experience rather than learning, including at institutional level. Our conversations helped bring pedagogical underpinnings of global partnerships more to the fore, recognising that the approaches to learning adopted might also influence, or be influenced by, institutional approaches. We see promise in the growth of pedagogically driven and more sustainable activities like COIL, and emergence of networks that support colleagues who feel abandoned and adrift, and commitment of professional colleagues to make institutional processes more transparent and to facilitate a more open reflection on which, how and why, GHEPs are supported.

In order to shift to more people-centred, education-focused partnerships continuous and open dialogue needs to be sustained between staff, students, managers and stakeholders across all institutions. If, as Adam and Lanford (2010) state, we are to understand the institution as a complex organism impacted by internal external factors, this dialogue is essential. In recognising the complexities of each organism, we can create an ecosystem that thrives on equitable and reciprocal dynamics.

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