



Growing transnational partnership educational provision via a Learning Development strategy: possibilities and pitfalls

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Presentation abstract

Educational provision within transnational partnerships arrangements has come under increased scrutiny in recent years. This lightning talk focused on the creation of a Professional Development Series (PDS) initiative in the transnational educational partnership work at London Metropolitan University designed to strengthen cooperative, dialogic practice and to embed a strong communities of practice approach (Wenger, 1998) within partnership work. The PDS programme ran in the autumn of 2023 with hourly sessions roughly twice a month. It sought to bring together partnership educators from all backgrounds (including frontline teaching educators, library staff educators and educators in quality and governance) and included education-focused sessions ('Evaluating the quality of learning and teaching' and 'Supporting learners who are struggling with their studies'), research-focused sessions ('Understanding research ethics' and 'Exploring quantitative research'), graduation-focused sessions ('Embedding employability in HE curricula'), and a session dedicated to partnership work ('Working successfully in partnerships'). Conroy's lightning talk outlined the starting points and principles underlying the PDS before discussing how to design and run Learning Development initiatives in transnational education, including points around initial reconnaissance work, pragmatics, tone, and how to foster dialogue and interaction within session spaces. Attention then turned to evaluating what may amplify or diminish the success and impact of such programmes and finally raised discussion points intended to spur debate among conference delegates around the boundaries, parameters, and desirable points of emphasis for Learning Development initiatives in transnational educational provision.

Keywords: transnational education; professional development; partnerships; learning development.

Community response

In his mini keynote at ALDCon 2024, Conroy explored the significant growth in transnational education (TNE) over the last decade (Conroy, 2024). These arrangements refer to the provision of education by institutions in one country to students in another country through a partnership arrangement (Jisc, 2021). This can involve franchising university degrees for delivery in an institution other than the host institution that ultimately certifies the degree award or validated delivery.

Kevin Watson, who was the session chair for Conroy's lightning talk, was struck by the dangers posed by transnational education being regarded as a 'bolt on' to UK universities' home campus provision. Although TNE is meant to meet the standard of the university validating the awards, there is a great deal that might be lost in translation because of technology, cultural differences, or the practical issue of finding a time for busy people to meet across multiple time zones. He noted how Conroy identified tension between needing programmes to meet the standards of UK universities while also not only allowing but genuinely valuing regional variations in teaching and assessment. This means that although TNE is partly transactional in nature, it is essential that the reciprocal benefits of working in partnership are clear to all involved.

It was these reciprocal benefits that Conroy explored during his lightning talk, which focused on a cyclical model of professional development through exploration of a Professional Development Series (PDS). This series offered colleagues the opportunity to reflect on wide-ranging issues, including inclusivity, research ethics, and evaluating the quality of learning and teaching. It was designed to ensure that the standard of UK higher education (UK HE) could be maintained, while also giving voice to colleagues in partner institutions to influence the content of such sessions and the development of programmes in future years. The series foregrounded how working in partnership can help to develop new pedagogic ties that refresh and enhance the curriculum.

The PDS was designed and developed for collaborative partnerships in the School of Social Sciences and Professions at London Metropolitan University. It consisted of 12 one-hour online sessions that ran every other week during the autumn term of 2023/24 (see Figure 1). The series was underpinned by an emphasis on developing a community of practice (CoP). Wegner (1998) emphasises that a CoP involves people who share a

common passion for what they do coming together to learn how to do it better through regular engagement with each other. In this way, the PDS emphasised that learning is a socially situated activity. Conroy explained how 11 principles were devised to underpin the PDS (see Figure 2), which he has written about more broadly with a colleague from London Met (Conroy and Vasant, 2024). In his lightning talk, he emphasised the importance of 4 of the principles (shown in bold in Figure 2).

Figure 1. An overview of the Professional Development Series.

Professional Development Series- guide		
Week	Focus	Date/ time (UK time)
1	Working successfully in partnership	Monday 18th Sept, 1pm
2	Designing accessible, inclusive learning and teaching environments	Tuesday 19th Sept, 9am
3	Evaluating the Quality of Learning and Teaching	Monday 9th Oct, 1pm
4	Supporting learners who are struggling with their studies	Tuesday 10th Oct, 1pm
5	Designing dissertation research projects	Monday 23rd Oct, 1pm
6	Understanding research ethics	Tuesday 31st Oct, 9am
7	Conducting a successful Literature Review	Monday 13th Nov, 1pm
8	Introducing Quantitative Research	Tuesday 14th Nov, 9am
9	Introducing Qualitative Research	Monday 27th Nov, 1pm
10	Marking submitted work and providing high quality feedback	Tuesday 28th Nov, 9am
11	Embedding employability in HE curricula	Monday 11th Dec, 1pm
12	Introduction to the SSSP Partnership PhD Fee Waiver Scheme (TBC)	Tuesday 12th Dec, 9am

Firstly, Conroy highlighted the importance of principle 3, which emphasised how the PDS should be shaped through an identification of the kinds of educational development provision the frontline partnership educators felt they needed. This approach connected to principle 6, which recognised that educators' time is a finite resource. Through developing a consistent and coherent approach across the PDS, it was emphasised how the time educators had put into the series was recognised and appreciated. Conroy described how this was supported by having a single point of entry for the series. He demonstrated how Padlet was used as a dedicated collaborative online platform to host session slides, recordings, in-session activities, and additional materials (see Figure 3). This approach also reinforced value 7 by demonstrating strategies that can be used by educators in their work with their students. Finally, Conroy emphasised value 10, which focused on the importance of articulating how the series can be part of a longer-term pedagogic journey of continuous professional development to strengthen TNE partnerships.

Figure 2. Principles underlying the Professional Development Series.

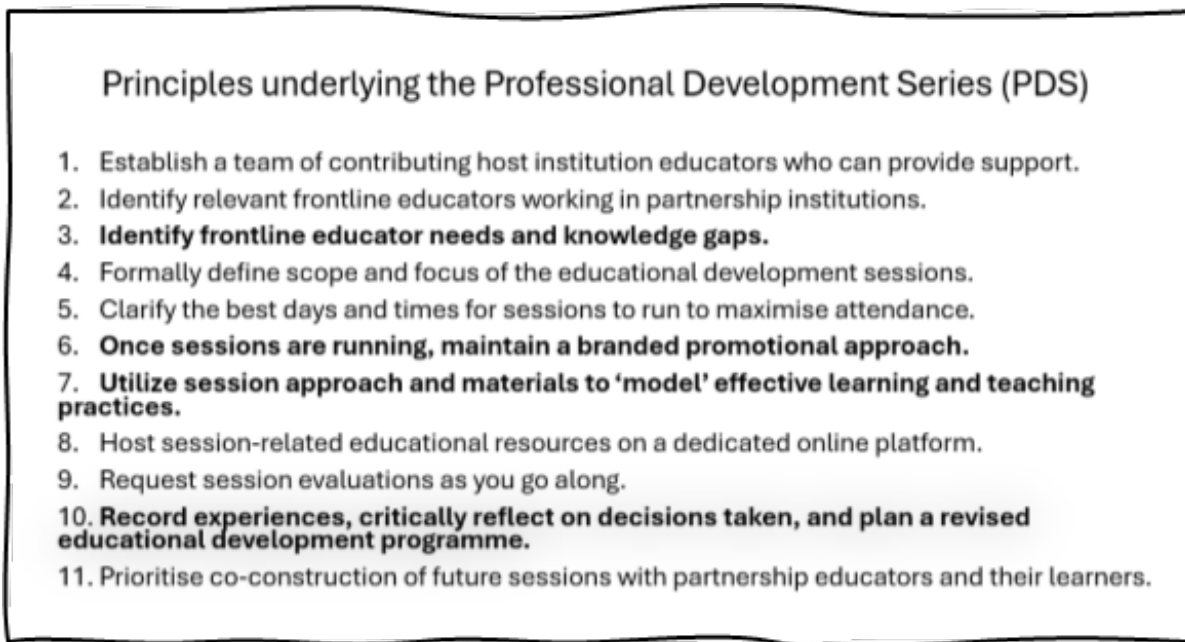
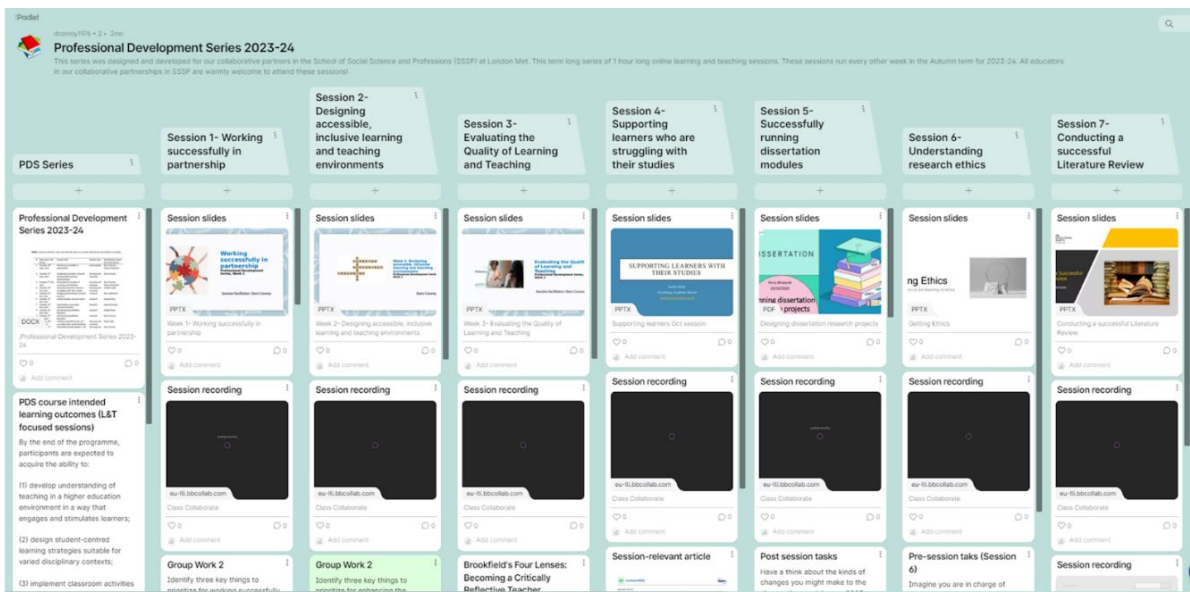


Figure 3. A Padlet board was used as a collaborative repository for hosting session resources, activity responses, and additional materials.



Although Conroy’s focus was on professional development to support TNE, the approach he advocated had a broader appeal and relevance. Webster (2024, p.192) has argued that the Learning Development sector is ‘often not well integrated within the formal architecture of teaching and learning structures and processes’ of universities. Through supporting the delivery of training programmes such as the PDS, Learning Developers can raise the profile of their work and highlight how it is connected to and supports broader institutional

strategic agendas. These priorities may focus on an institution's approach to internationalisation, but they could also be developed in supporting work on reducing awarding gaps, strengthening student wellbeing and belonging, inclusive curricula, or access and outreach. In this way, Conroy's talk demonstrated a practical way for Learning Developers to evidence and promote their expertise across their institutions.

Next steps and additional questions

In his talk, Conroy noted that there are potential pitfalls of developing a professional development series—most notably the time-poor climate that dominates the higher education sector. It is essential that the tone of such programmes is carefully pitched to emphasise partnership and reciprocity with participants. Conroy has emphasised elsewhere the importance of seeking feedback before, during, and after such professional development programmes to help evaluate and refine the offer (Conroy and Vasant, 2024). It is also important to address logistical issues, such as different time zones, which demonstrates the importance of having a streamlined access point (as shown through the Padlet) to reduce potential barriers for engagement. Meeting these challenges can unlock the possibilities of such ventures, including offering a dedicated space for dialogue about educational approaches, helping to identify educational development needs, and presenting a symbolic move towards meaningful partnership work.

In concluding his talk, Conroy left the community with an important question to consider: how would you approach educational development for TNE/partnerships in your institution? In answering this question, he encouraged us to think about the starting points, boundaries, and desirable lines of emphasis for Learning Development initiatives in TNE. Kevin Watson took up Conroy's question after the conference. Watson had been struck by the relative invisibility of initiatives such as the PDS across the sector. After the conference, Watson read more about transnational partnerships and the claims made about them. The British Council (2022) have emphasised that TNE is a key driver of the United Nations Sustainable Development Goals, while the International Higher Education Commission (2023) has demonstrated that such arrangements significantly increase the geographical diversity of the student population connected to UK HE, which has the potential to help us internationalise what we do.

In Watson's institution, one-to-one appointments with students, which are part of the Learning Development offer, are used as a research tool to explore emerging hidden curriculum challenges and help the university respond to these. Watson suggests the reflective activities that Conroy outlined during his talk have the potential to be this kind of research tool, allowing not only those involved in TNE programme delivery but all of us to draw on the wisdom of the global educational community. To misquote Chief Brody in *Jaws*, 'We're going to need a bigger classroom'.

Author's reflection

Presenting in a lightning talk panel brings challenges in any context. Adding to the challenge in this case was the limited familiarity that many delegates were likely to have with transnational education. Five minutes, then—no pressure!

Something I particularly enjoyed about this presentation, however, stemmed directly from the need to condense complex and potentially novel ideas into a short space of time. Partnerships work, and transnational education, like any area of work in higher education, can become bogged down with technicalities, assumed knowledge, and the typical acronyms and jargon which can conceal shared meaning and mutual understanding.

The session involved outlining the potential barriers involved in partnership work (including understanding how internal operations work in HEIs) and articulating the opportunities presented by TNE work (such as the possibilities for inter-continental synergies between educators relating to assessment, learning, or teaching). From this outline and the brief discussion that followed, there seemed to be clear points of connection with delegates present in the session, many of whom had some experience of partnership work, even if they were mainly not directly involved in this work in their day jobs.

I was delighted to have the opportunity to share my practice experiences of delivering a professional development initiative for our partnership provision and look forward to taking reflections forward to the next iteration of this initiative.

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