Using Partnerships to Achieve National Goals

Pamela L. Eddy

Abstract—Ireland developed a National Strategy 2030 that argued for the creation of a new form of higher education institution, a Technological University. The research reported here reviews the first stage of this partnership development. The study found that national policy can create system capacity and change, but that individual partners may have more to gain or lose in collaborating. When presented as a zero-sum activity, fear among partners is high. The level of knowledge and networking within the higher education system possessed by each partner contributed to decisions to participate or not in a joint proposal for collaboration. Greater success resulted when there were gains for all partners. This research concludes that policy mandates can provide motivation to collaborate, but that the partnership needs to be built more on shared values versus coercion by mandates.

Keywords—Leadership, Partnerships, Policy, Strategic Planning.

I. INTRODUCTION

PARTNERSHIPS are increasingly pursued as a mechanism to share resources, address national problems, and to leverage shared strategic goals. When they work, resources are optimized, individual organizational needs are met, and outcomes are greater than could be achieved by a single entity [1]. When they do not work or last, time and resources invested are ultimately lost, even when accounting for short term gains [2]. Moreover, other potential opportunities may have been by-passed that would have eventually been successful.

The OECD [3] review of higher education in Ireland resulted in the following themes: Strategic steering of the tertiary educational system; Governance and management of higher education institutions; Strategic management of research, research and development, and innovation; Access and participation; and Investment in the tertiary system. The OECD [3] report specifically concluded that Ireland needed to "take steps to integrate the components better than it does" (p. 37). Partnerships serve as one form of integration of the higher education system in Ireland.

The *National Strategy for Higher Education to 2030* [4] showcases how Ireland responded to the needs outlined in the 2006 OECD report. The *National Strategy* report put forth three areas of foci: the context of higher education, the mission and vision for higher education, and the system changes needed to support the core mission of higher education. The need for partnerships and other forms of collaboration are central to many of these strategic objectives, but are clearly apparent in the recommendation to develop

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"regional clusters of collaborating institutions" and the need to have "institutional consolidation that will result in a smaller number of larger institutions" (p. 15) [4].

The Higher Education Authority (HEA) in Ireland published a series of papers that provide a road map for achieving the national strategy objectives. The HEA outlined the criteria for proposals for establishing a Technological University [5]. Initial proposals were submitted in July 2012. Three Dublin based Institutes of Technology put in a proposal for a Technological University of Dublin Alliance. The research reported here investigates the development of the initial proposal using the lenses of policy instruments [6] and partnership development [7].

II. BACKGROUND LITERATURE

A. Partnership Model

Amey, Eddy, and Campbell [8] presented a partnership model that contains three specific stages. Phase one focuses the role of antecedents and motivations for each partnering organization, reviewing reasons for joining with others and factors to be considered in selecting viable prospective collaborators. In particular, the contribution of individual social capital and power are examined as they influence relationships created in the partnership. In phase two, what often begins with a formal process (e.g., contracts, external mandates) increasingly relies on a social process (trust, networks of relationships) as the partnership progresses and becomes more institutionalized. Trust between individuals within the partnership grows through interacting and obtaining mutual benefit. Another key element during the development stage is institutional compatibility. Partnerships between colleges and business or community associations often have to address different cultures and organizational processes in order to establish more productive and effective working relationships. Finally, in phase three, the partnership model evolves and creates partnership capital. Partnership capital forms in a context of shared norms, shared beliefs, and networking that align processes among individual collaborators. Not all collaborations result in partnership capital. However, if it is a goal for an educational collaboration to be sustained over time, amidst competing priorities, different cultures, reward systems, decision making structures, or challenging environments, partnership capital is fundamental to achieving this end.

Partnerships become strategic when they tap into the goals of the partner organizations and build on shared values and aspirations. Strategic partnerships are intentionally formed with goal alignment among collaborators a central factor that occurs on an organizational level.

B. Policy Instruments

Policy can be used in a number of ways to influence change. McDonnell and Elmore [6] present various forms of policy instruments. These include: 1. Mandates that are used to result in compliance based on a set of regulations and rules; 2. Inducements in the form of transactions to motivate particular outcomes. Often, funding is the main inducement; 3. Capacity-building in which funding serves as an investment to expand either physical plant or human capital to achieve greater outcomes; or 4. System-changing actions in which authority among individuals and agencies is enhanced to result in changes to the system in which public goods and services are delivered (p. 134). Links are evident between the type of policy instrument used and the resulting form of change. Mandates and inducements are tools for transactional leadership actions [9] and once incentives are removed, the change ends [10]. Capacity-building and system-changing policy actions instead can help support longer-lasting and deeper levels of change. An awareness of these underlying linkages helps in understanding better the reasons behind both policy formation and outcomes and the forms of partnerships created.

C. Irish Context

Ireland presents a unique context for the establishment of a new form of institution, namely a Technological University. First, as a country of 4 million citizens, it boasts 7 universities, 7 third level colleges, and 14 Institutes of Technology. The HEA recognizes that this current structure is unsustainable in a time of fiscal exigency. Second, as a small country, Ireland is working to increase its infrastructure for higher education outcomes, in particular as this relates to research productivity. In its 2006 OECD report [3], Ireland identified two main goals: increasing production of PhD students and obtaining globally ranking for at least one of its institutions of higher education. Finally, Ireland's participation in the European Union creates opportunities for other types of partnerships for colleges that may be more lucrative than those that are only Ireland based. In this complex environment, the HEA seeks to streamline its structure, governance, and mission.

III. METHODS

A case study methodology was employed for this research [11], [12]. "By concentrating on a single phenomenon or entity (the case), the researcher aims to uncover the interaction of significant factors characteristic of the phenomenon" [11, p. 29). In this research, the boundaries of the case include the Dublin based Institutes of Technology (IoT) engaged in putting forth a proposal to the Higher Education Authority regarding the creation of a Technological University. Initially, four IoTs were involved in the conversation, but the final proposal involved only three. Data collection included all four institutions.

Interviews occurred with the presidents of the four IoTs; at one institution a presidential change provided an opportunity to interview two different presidents—one pre-proposal and one post-proposal. The interview methods involved semi-structured interviews using a hermeneutic phenomenology [13] approach in the case studies. Interview questions focused on uncovering how the leaders interpreted the National Strategy report on their campus and how they viewed the emerging partnership and resulting proposal to create a new, unique technological university in Dublin. Of particular interest was the influence of national policy on institutional responses. Document analysis provided triangulation to the interview data [11].

The framework for analysis used Eddy's [7] strategic partnership model and McDonnell and Elmore's [6] policy instruments to determine the type of change supported via the national policy mandate. Data analysis involved looking for patterns using categories and interpretation from the participant interviews and document analysis [14]. Particular attention was paid to how change was framed for individual college stakeholders [15].

IV. FINDINGS

Three main findings emerged from this research. First, national policy can influence capacity building within the higher education sector. Second, strategic partnerships result when institutional goals and values align. Third, the level of personal and organizational capital available influences partnership formation.

A. Capacity Building

The HEA focused funding on post-secondary research beginning in 1998 and to date has invested €1.22 billion to support expansion of research infrastructure and investment in human capital [16]. This form of capacity building through policy decisions set the stage for the current national strategy and its focus on system change. Several competing notions are driving change in Ireland and generating the need to develop a cohesive centralized plan [5]. Given the pressure to change the system of higher education in Ireland to one of more coherence and less institutional autonomy, the HEA clarified objectives of their National Strategy Plan in its 2012 report. One of the objectives was to develop a system-level approach that moves towards more coordination among the Higher Education Institutions that includes distinction of missions and diversity of missions [5, pp. 5-6].

The use of funding to help influence change on campuses and to send a message regarding national priorities was part of the capacity building that occurred. This policy message was not lost on the institutional leaders. As one of the IoT president's reflected, "we should be part of the solution versus part of the problem." An institutional awareness of the changing landscape and the economic pressures facing the country meant that college leaders contemplated how to leverage the funding opportunities available to them as the HEA built tertiary capacity in the country. The change in the HEA funding models set the stage for change, but the change itself had to come from the institutions. How to select partners became the first challenge.

B. Strategic Partnership

In July 2012 a proposal was put forth for the creation of the Technological University of Dublin Alliance. The three Institutes of Technology involved were Dublin Institute of Technology (DIT); Institute of Technology Tallaght (ITT); Institute of Blanchardstown (ITB). The proposal argued that these Institutes "already share this vision for higher education [to be globally competitive] and have an agreed strategy for its implementation" [17, p. 1]. Further, the proposal stated "TU Dublin, as part of its strategy, will be proactive in initiating collaborations for the benefit of the region" [17, p. 6].

The Institutes of Technology in the Dublin region were well known to one another and had a history of cross fertilization of personnel, collaborations, and shared interests. As one of the presidents commented, "we were in each other's orbit." What changed as a result of the National Strategy [4] was moving from informal partnerships to formal partnerships. The proposal put forth to create a Technological University of Dublin Alliance specifically addresses the role of strategic alignment; the report argues that the three Institutes of Technology "already share this vision for higher education [to make Ireland globally competitive] and have an agreed strategy for its implementation" [17, p. 1]. The informal conversations occurring among the Dublin based institutes since 2009 provided a forum for discussion of ideas, mapping out expectations, and arguing for institutional roles.

Initial dialogue regarding the proposal for TU-Dublin included the Institute of Art and Design Technology (IADT). Before the criteria were spelled out on the guidelines for proposing a TU, speculation existed regarding the requirements and timelines. During this period, exploration occurred among the four Dublin based IoTs regarding the potential to partner. Even during this stage, the IADT held concerns over the strategic fit of aligning with the other institutes due to its specific mission foci, student demographics, and size. A concern during this stage of discussion was how institutional identity would be maintained in a new configuration and fear that the largest institution, DIT, would subsume the other IoTs in the process.

Ultimately, the proposal to create TU-Dublin included three of the Dublin based IoTs, namely DIT, ITT, and ITB. IADT opted not to participate as the institutional leaders and board felt that the alliance did not fit with their institute's strategic objectives in the same manner as it did for the final three partners. Here, fit matters. The approach to the ongoing change involved collaboration in the creation of the TU-Dublin proposal and the involvement of key stakeholders on all three campuses and in the community. The acknowledgement of the need for system changes to create a newly formed organizational structure recognizes the need for attention to the interconnections among the partners and the role of relationships. Appreciative Inquiry is one method being used during this change process [17].

C. Leveraging Capital

A number of types of capital exist in the formation of partnerships. The people involved in establishing and maintaining the partnerships possess different levels of social capital [18]—for example, close ties with others, trusting relationships, and levels of responsibility and power within the home organizations. Social capital often is a basis for why certain relationships become relevant within partnerships and connections made based on the use of an individual's social capital support different opportunities for cultivating relationships that sustain partnerships. Organizational capital is another critical component in emerging partnerships. Here, organizational capital refers to the size of the institution, the resources it has at its disposal, and the reach it has within its context of operation [19].

The small size of Ireland contributes to high levels of social capital among college leaders. Long-standing alliances among programs, movement of personnel among the IoTs, and informal conversations created a context ripe for change. The social networks within the country are tight. The time gap between the announcement of the National Strategy in 2011 and the publication of the criteria for submission of proposals for TU designation created a time of slack in the system. This period of time allowed the leaders of the IoTs in the Dublin region an opportunity to have informal conversations to discuss options for partnering, to problem solve anticipated challenges, and to determine alignment of strategic objectives. The HEA primed the pump for these discussions with the National Strategy report and the time lag between this report and the call for proposals allowed the institutional leaders an opportunity to engage campus and community members in the conversation to generate greater buy-in for the ultimate proposal. The social capital of the individual presidents provided leverage internally to engage in these conversations and importantly, provided a period to build trust among the final partners and to create the framework and communication vehicles that framed how communication about TU-Dublin occurred.

V. Discussion

The formation of the partnership for TU-Dublin allows investigation into the early stages of partnership development. In particular, the roles of motivation and context provide a means of discussing what can be learned from this research. Evident in this research are links to strategic objectives, both for the individual partner institutes and for the HEA in achieving national goals. Each of the college leaders could connect benefits of partnering to their institutional mission. Key to success at this initial stage was an awareness of how the culture of the individual institutes would be retained and built upon in the new format of organization created by the TU-Dublin Alliance. The three campus locations retain a presence in each local community, but the new alliance recognizes that it is creating something unique and intends to draw from the strengths of its members with a focus on new

approaches to providing educational opportunities. As the TU-Dublin proposal posits, "Combining the complementary strengths of the partner institutions opens up a real possibility to create a different kind of educational entity for a new style of graduate" [17, p. 2]. Fig. 1 shows how the new alliance might be envisioned as growing out of the foundation set by the three institutes in Dublin. Each of the IoTs [Dublin Institute of Technology (DIT), Institute of Technology Tallaght (ITT), and Institute of Technology Blanchardstown (ITB)] provide the framework in which the new Technological University is situated. TU-Dublin draws on the strengths of each of the IoTs and builds on established networks and relationships.

Fig. 1 Building of the Strategic Partnership—TU—Dublin

Conceiving of the interrelationships among the institutes in this building block manner provides a representation of the alliance and the relationships that allowed for its creation. The social capital of the leaders of each of the institutes provided an adaptive space in which conversations regarding partnering could occur. What is notable is that despite the size differential, the partners were able to put forth a proposal that highlights the contributions of each institute. DIT is five to six times larger than the other two institutes, but the language of the proposal shows shared contribution and benefits through the alliance. Initial fear of DIT using its size to overpower the smaller institutes in the region is not evident in the proposal. Yet, the fact that IADT opted not to participate also shows the critical role of strategic alignment for the partners. Initial conversations with IADT were encouraging in finding a space within the alliance to still allow the institute to retain some of its identity within the larger partnership. Over the three year period of discussions, however, the leadership and board at IADT concluded that the strategic alignment was not strong enough and the institute ultimately opted out of the proposed alliance.

The slack in the system of higher education in Ireland between 2009 and 2012 when the proposal was submitted proved critical. First, the time span highlighted how the external economic climate was not improving, and this financial crisis contributed to the motivation of the institute leaders to question their historic assumptions and conclude that change was required. Second, the time span allowed for larger groups to participate in the process of envisioning what a new system could look like and how individuals and areas saw they could fit into this new alliance. Fear is a barrier to change and the leaders needed this time to show campus members how they could see the potential of the partnership

[20]. Third, second-order change occurred because the time span allowed for double-loop learning as stakeholders wrestled with strongly held assumptions of post-secondary education [21]. Finally, the period of slack created a space in which policy makers continued to refine the operationalization of the National Strategy [4] and to reinforce how the policy supported capacity building and ultimately system-change.

The HEA provided capacity building for institutions of higher education since 1998 with the infusion of capital into the system via PRTLI funding [16]. This support provided a strong foundation for ultimate system changes. The realization within the country that Ireland could no longer sustain such a large network of independent colleges, universities, and institutes created a starting point for looking at regional clusters and reconfiguration. The Irish context of fiscal exigency provided a tipping point for change to occur as the situation grew more urgent [22].

VI. CONCLUSION

Even though at the time of this writing the proposed TU-Dublin Alliance was not officially approved, the research on the development stages of the proposal provides several conclusions about partnership development. First, the steps taken in developing this partnership were strategic versus what historically is evident in more traditional partnerships built more on happenstance, chasing after short-term funding opportunities, or individual partner interests. Instead, the strategic partnership outlined in the proposal to create a Technological University shows intentionality in links between partners that align with institutional mission and values. The intention of system-change by policy makers was evident by the institutional focus on creating second-order change within the process. Second, this research found that slack in the system contributed to the ability of the partners to create the alliance [23]. In this case, slack resulted due to the economic downturn in Ireland and the excess capacity that emerged as a result in Ireland's institutions of higher education. The HEA was able to use this outcome to its advantage to support system changes and the individual institutes were able to use the adaptive space [24] created to question underlying assumptions of operation and move toward second-order change [21]. Finally, the motivations to partner based on alignment of strategic objectives are not enough to assure success. The relationships created among partners serves as a critical linchpin in the process. Time allows the creation of trust, allows for the creation of shared language, and strengthens the ties that bind. Because leadership in the partnering organizations has been fairly stable, relationships were allowed to mature and be tested. The social capital of the institute leaders helped leverage institutional buy-in. The potential for the emergence of partnership capital [8] in the proposed alliance is heightened when the partners develop a set of shared norms, shared beliefs, and networking that aligns with strategic objectives.

This research determined several implications for policy

makers and institutional leaders. For institutional leaders looking for partners to leverage the resources at their disposal, it is critical to ascertain alignment of values and mission. Partnerships built on strategic alignment have a greater chance for success versus those built on short-term economic gains. Leaders must allow the time and space for organizational members to grapple with long-held assumptions and to see how change is possible when these assumptions are questioned and challenged. The use of common language to frame the hoped for change began to build a shared understanding of the change process. Policy makers need to consider their ultimate goals and objectives. Mandates and inducements can achieve objectives in the short-term, but typically this change does not last once funding is gone or the mandate fulfilled. Instead, taking a longer term look at capacity building and system change requires policy makers to look at the environmental context and to create policy that advances change through strategic alignments. In Ireland, the creation of the National Strategy Report [4] provided a road map for the institutions of higher education in the country. Knowing the goals and objectives of the nation regarding education helps colleges to then see more clearly how their strategic plans can align to help meet these outcomes. When planning outcomes are clear, policy objectives are more likely to result in practice. This research concludes that strategic partnerships can achieve policy goals and result in system change.

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