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Knowledge sharing in China–UK higher education alliances

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ABSTRACT

Knowledge sharing through cross-border strategic alliances has been seen by firms as one of the critical strategies to pursue sustainable competitive advantage. However, empirical investigations on how knowledge sharing occurs in strategic alliances are limited and are rarely concerned with strategic alliances in the higher education industry. Based on an empirical investigation of China–UK educational alliances, this research sheds light on this under explored area. Findings reveal that the scale of academic and organizational knowledge sharing is affected by knowledge attributes and partner characteristics. While knowledge sharing in China–UK higher education alliances displays numerous similarities with that occurring in other industries, this study reveals features that are distinct to this important and increasingly international sector. In so doing, this paper offers valuable insights for managers and policy makers concerned with the internationalization of higher education.

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1. Introduction

Since the 1990s knowledge sharing has been seen by firms as one of the critical strategies required to sustain competitive advantage, this is because ‘the integration of knowledge’ is central to a firm’s competitive capability (Grant, 1996, p. 375). This increased attention to knowledge sharing coincided with the rise of cross-border strategic alliances (Bleeke & Ernst, 1995). However, the mainstream literature has focused on *what* factors influence knowledge sharing, but few empirical studies have investigated how *what* and *who* factors influence the extent of knowledge sharing in strategic alliances (Meier, 2011).

Discussion of knowledge sharing in business alliances has been mainly focused on testing what factors could possibly influence knowledge sharing, such as the attributes of knowledge (Choi & Lee, 1997; Kogut & Zander, 1993; Zander & Kogut, 1995), partner characteristics (Grant & Baden-Fuller, 2004; Lane & Lubatkin, 1998; Mowery, Oxley, & Silverman, 1996), partner interaction (Mowery et al., 1996; Nielsen, 2007; Park & Russo, 1996; Schoenmakers & Duysters, 2006), learning (Argote, 1999) and alliance governance structure (Chen, 2004; Inkpen, 2000; Kogut, 1988; Mowery et al., 1996; Sampson, 2004). However, the majority of the research has focused on singular interrelations between

these sets of factors, and only a small amount of research has adopted an integrated and interactive approach to examine how the *what* (knowledge attributes) and *who* (partner characteristics) factors influence knowledge sharing (Chen, 2004). In addition, the existing research relies heavily on the private sector as the principal source of theoretical development. This has conceptually constrained our understanding of knowledge sharing that has taken place in alliances in a wider range of industries, including the higher education (HE) sector (Rashman, Withers, & Hartley, 2009).

Driven by globalization, Higher Education Institutes (HEIs), namely universities, have ‘expanded their provisions all over the world through strategic alliances to enhance their influences, visibility, and/or market share on the international scene’ (Denman, 2000, p. 5). Knowledge acquired through cooperating with an international partner helps universities stand out from the crowd (Chen, 2004). Saffu and Mamman (2000, p. 511) examined 22 Australian universities involved in alliances and found that 71% of those engaged in offshore activities were motivated by sharing knowledge with overseas partners. Between 2006 and 2009, the number of international joint venture campuses in the global HE industry increased by 43 per cent, to 162 (OBHE, 2009). The UK, with 13 international joint ventures, is ranked number three after the US and Australia (Becker, 2010). Among the host countries, China is ranked in second position after the United Arab Emirates (Becker, 2010). By 2005, there were more than 1000 products offered by foreign universities in China, serving a total of 100,000 students and forming a key component of the Chinese HE sector (Li, 2008). Among these products, the largest portion (19.8%) was

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provided by UK universities (MoE, 2011). However, research on how international alliance partners share knowledge in the HE industry is rare, and particularly in relation to China–UK alliances. To address this paucity of research this paper investigates knowledge sharing in China–UK HE alliances. In particular, the paper is guided by the following research questions: First, how and to what extent do partners in different forms of China–UK educational alliances share their knowledge? Second, how do knowledge attributes and partner characteristics influence knowledge sharing in China–UK educational alliances?

The paper begins with a review of the extant literature on how knowledge attributes and partner characteristics influence knowledge sharing in business alliances and assesses its relevance for understanding HE alliances. The two propositions that frame the study are derived from this review. A discussion of the research methodology employed follows in which we explain why the case study method was selected as the main research instrument and how the data were collected and analyzed. The findings are then reported and discussed in relation to the key research questions and propositions. Finally, the implications of the findings for research and practice are considered.

2. Literature review

2.1. Knowledge attributes and knowledge sharing in strategic alliances

Knowledge attributes affect ‘what’ is shared. Zack (1999) defines knowledge as accumulated information gained via experience, communication or inference. Knowledge exists in explicit and tacit forms. Explicit knowledge can be codified or articulated (Inkpen & Dinur, 1998) and remains within the organization after employees leave (Coukos-Semmel, 2003). It is normally transmittable in formal, systematic language and may include explicit facts, axiomatic propositions, and symbols (Kogut & Zander, 1993). In contrast, tacit knowledge is often non-verbalised, intuitive, and unarticulated (Polanyi, 1966). It manifests itself in cognitive, technical (Johnson-Laird, 1983) and social (Lam, 1997; Spender, 1996) dimensions. The cognitive dimension refers to beliefs, images, intuition and ‘mental models’ (Nonaka, 1994); the technical dimension refers to the ‘know-how’ applicable to specific situations (e.g. crafts). For Polanyi (1997), cognitive and technical knowledge is also described as theoretical knowledge (knowing what) and practical knowledge (knowing how). Social knowledge is embedded in social interactions and team relationships within organizations (Lam, 1997), as such, it is socially constructed (Evans & Easterby-Smith, 2001). Recognizing that knowledge is more than an artefact that can be possessed, Orlikowski (2002) notes that ‘knowing’ how to get things done in complex organizational work is a dynamic process rather than stable property of the organization’s core competencies. Moreover, tacit knowledge is central to knowing.

In HE, Coukos-Semmel (2003) classifies knowledge into two types: academic or scholarly knowledge, and non-academic organizational knowledge. The production and dissemination of academic knowledge represents the primary purpose of universities, while organizational knowledge, which refers to the accumulated overall management experience, is required to support a university’s primary purpose (Coukos-Semmel, 2003). Both types of HE knowledge exist in explicit and tacit forms. However, the distribution between academic or organizational knowledge, whether explicit or tacit, is not clear, and a conceptual framework to differentiate between the various types of knowledge in HE is necessary (Guzman & Trivelato, 2011).

Drawing on the existing literature concerning the nature of knowledge, the classification of academic and organizational

Table 1
Categories of knowledge in HE.

	Explicit	Tacit
Academic	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Course outline, • Teaching slides • Textbooks • Assessment strategies 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Knowledge delivery • Teaching style–learning by doing • Course design • Course management
Organizational	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Policies • Procedures • Business plans • Data base • Directories • Accounting procedures 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Research excellence (funding, attracting and retaining research experts) • Management know-how, routines • Organizational culture • Experience

knowledge in HE, and, importantly, the in-depth understanding of knowledge in the HE sector accumulated by the authors, who have an average of 20 years’ lecturing and administrative experience in HE,¹ this study classifies HE knowledge into four types as shown in Table 1: explicit academic knowledge, tacit academic knowledge, explicit organizational knowledge and tacit organizational knowledge.

Explicit academic knowledge exists in the forms of textbooks, course outlines and teaching slides, which serve one aspect of the university’s primary purpose, that is, the dissemination of knowledge. For example, course outlines allow uniform course distribution and development (Guzman & Trivelato, 2011), and books represent a key means of transmitting explicit knowledge in HE (Teichler, 2004). With respect to teaching, the tacit aspect of academic knowledge is gained from experience and embedded in individual lecturer’s mental models and skill sets (Guzman & Trivelato, 2011). According to the UK’s Higher Education Academy (HEA, 2012), teaching knowledge entails the following six dimensions: core knowledge of subject material, an appropriate appreciation of methods for teaching, knowledge of how students learn, the ability to use and value relevant technologies, an understanding of methods for evaluating the effectiveness of teaching, and knowledge of the implications of quality assurance and enhancement procedures. Moreover, tacit academic knowledge underpins pedagogical practices (Guzman & Trivelato, 2011).

Organizational knowledge is ‘the capability members of an organization have developed to draw distinctions in the process of carrying out their work in particular concrete contexts, by enacting sets of generalizations whose application depends on historically evolved collective understandings and experiences’ (Tsoukas & Vladimirou, 2001, p. 983). The existing literature claims that organizational knowledge has either a single category, namely knowledge embedded in organizational routines (Bontis & Crossan, 1999) or exists in different types, for example, systemic, social–political and strategic (Evans & Easterby-Smith, 2001), or strategic and technical (Child & Rodrigues, 1996). Although there is no consensus on a classification of organizational knowledge, it is commonly accepted that organizational knowledge has tacit and explicit dimensions, which are like the two sides of a coin rather than separate entities (Evans & Easterby-Smith, 2001). Explicit organizational knowledge refers to ‘objectified knowledge’ that is encoded in organizational practices, procedures and routines (Evans & Easterby-Smith, 2001, p. 5). Therefore, in HE explicit organizational knowledge is reflected in an organization’s policies, business plans, databases, directories or accounting procedures (Coukos-Semmel, 2003). Tacit organizational knowledge is not

¹ Three of the authors have experience working in both Chinese and UK HEIs. In addition, the first has held a senior management position in the international office of a Chinese HEI.

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